

Why didn't 'they' do something? From playgrounds to wearing seat belts, safety is up to parents; [SA2 Edition]

By Frank Jones
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Dr. Irv Feferman took the words out of my mouth. When a 5-year-old boy strangled on a rope tied to a slide in the playground at a Mississauga housing complex this winter, angry residents in the complex demanded to know why "they" - security guards or management people - hadn't cut down the rope.

In fact, a superintendent said he'd cut down the rope several times, but it always reappeared.

But the real point - and I was all set to write a column about it - was: why didn't the parents cut down the rope themselves when they saw the danger, instead of leaving it to someone else.

Only I didn't get to write the column because Irv Feferman, who is director of emergency services at Scarborough General Hospital, beat me to it.

He issued his own blast in the form of a letter to the editor saying that parents too often blame the mysterious "they" when they themselves should be looking out for the safety of their children.

Who is Feferman? I made inquiries and learned he is a man with a passion - the safety of children - and a man who speaks out about his passion every chance he gets.

In fact, I'd no sooner phoned Feferman to make an appointment than he called me back to give me an earful about some of his concerns. Things that should concern us all.

"I see parents taking all sorts of trouble bundling their children up in the winter in scarves and hats so they won't catch cold," he says. "In fact, bundling them up has nothing to do with whether they'll get colds or not. But I wish they'd take the same trouble over their children's safety."

Feferman, who shies away from being called "angry" and prefers "concerned," is 44, wanted to be a doctor for as long as he can remember, and even as an intern enjoyed the feeling of helping people directly in hospital emergency departments.

But it was as a father - he and his wife have three children, Jay, 12, Sari, 10, and Noah, 7 - that he found his work and his private life being drawn together to make him the campaigner he is today.

"It's when you become a parent that you realize how vulnerable children are," he said when I called on him at his private practice office behind a Scarborough shopping plaza.

He has even appeared in court cases where the negligence of parents is an issue in an accident and his message is always the same: it's the parents' obligation to protect the child.

Which makes life quite often uncomfortable for Irv Feferman - at home and at work.

At the hospital he sees the consequences of parental carelessness - kids injured in car accidents because they weren't wearing seatbelts, kids chopped by electric mower blades, bruised and broken from falls downstairs in baby-walkers, scalded by hot coffee left carelessly within reach, burned from shoving keys into electric outlets.

The list goes on and on. It could turn Feferman into the ultimate paranoid parent. "I saw two

girls going down a hill near us on roller blades, no helmets, no pads on their elbows or knees. If a car came, it would just be an accident waiting to happen. Noah wanted roller blades. I said, 'No way.' "

But he knows he can only carp so much. He sees one of his kids running into the street after a ball without even looking to see if a car's coming. He's been told over and over. "What can you do? You can't keep them in a prison," said Feferman.

Perhaps it's a parent's toughest decision - knowing when to leave room for a child's natural spirit of adventure and when to say no because of real dangers.

Feferman says his kids used the usual argument against using their bicycle helmets, "Nobody else has to wear them!" But it cut no ice. He insisted, and now, as more and more kids wear them, he hears fewer arguments.

There's always a steady stream of young accident victims at the hospital to remind him of the price of parental negligence. He calls most of them "the should have accidents."

"I can predict we will soon be seeing a couple more children drowned in backyard swimming pools," he said. "And the parents will be saying, 'I should have locked the gate' or 'I shouldn't have left Johnny in the pool while I went to answer the phone.' "

Parents rashly leave infants alone in the bathtub (sometimes thinking they're safe because the plug is not in when a toy can easily block the hole and cause them to drown), allow children to play on electric garage doors which can crush the child and even kill, and, incredibly, leave children in the car with the motor running while they dash into a shop.

A lot of those "should have" accidents involve overdoses. Children can die taking grandma or grandpa's heart medicine. Although not fatal, a common overdose villain are chewy children's vitamins in animal shapes which, says Feferman, children don't need to take in the first place.

Another villain in the home, although you may not recognize it, is the television. "It's a killer," said Feferman. The reason: children can't tell TV fantasy from reality. After watching WWF wrestling, kids'll try a pile driver on their friends or jumping on their heads, thinking they'll get up and walk away unhurt like their TV heroes.

They're used to seeing people getting shot without getting hurt and whether they're using suction-cup darts or plastic bullets, the results can be devastating when they try it themselves. The answer: make sure your kid knows what's real and what isn't on the tube.

The list of hazards is endless. But being alert and imaginative about the dangers in your child's life is probably the most important thing. Because you can be sure your kid will always find a new danger no one's thought of.

So, says Feferman by way of reassurance, "You can't expect to be 100 per cent perfect."