

Wayward Wandering

Dr. Matt Sanders

Crowded shopping malls and busy city footpaths are sometimes witness to the sight of a toddler leashed to his parents by way of a restraining harness.

Although this somewhat drastic solution can be helpful at the time, it is not usually recommended when dealing with the problems of a wandering toddler.

There is no doubt however, that when a young child strays in the wrong direction, or hides or runs away from their parents (even if in play), they may unknowingly run into danger, especially near strangers, roads, garages, machinery, or uneven ground.

That's why parents take the issue so seriously, and why in exasperation they may turn to a restraining harness. But the problem with a harness is that while it certainly stops the wandering and so keeps your child safe, it doesn't teach the child anything, and the wandering behavior often returns when the restraint is not used.

Better instead for your toddler to learn to stay close to you without the need for physical holding.

To stop children wandering it is important to act quickly and decisively, and to encourage them to stay close. Broadly, this involves making the behavior of remaining close to you more rewarding for your child than the excitement of running away or wandering about on their own.

Of course, children aren't always being naughty when they wander. Toddlers are easily distracted by things around them and may unintentionally walk away to look at something that has caught their eye. And since young toddlers have just discovered the joys of upright movement, they want to explore their environment.

Some toddlers often test the limits of their new found independence by seeing how far they can wander away before someone reacts. Others will run away because they know someone will chase them and it becomes a game.

It is important therefore that children are not ignored and forgotten while they are out walking with adults. Children who don't receive some positive attention for staying close to mom or dad are likely to wander off in search of something more interesting.

Try taking your child on planned short trips (about 5 minutes to start), avoiding busy places, and as you walk talk to them, pointing out flowers, birds, or anything of interest. At first, praise your child frequently for staying close before they have a chance to wander. Make sure the trip is at a time when your child is likely to enjoy it, not during usual sleep or meal times.

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Healthy children—body, heart and mind.

If your child starts to run off, immediately grab them and give them a firm instruction and follow up with action — “No, you are not staying close to Daddy. Now you must hold my hand for the next 20 steps.” Ignore protests and complaints and carry out the consequence.

This hand holding strategy should be used only once during a trip and if your child wanders again then use the consequence of “quiet time.” Explain to them that they have not stayed close so now they must stop and have quiet time. This involves removing your attention from your child for a short time.

You can sit your child on the pavement or stand on the grass verge until they have been quiet for 30 seconds. If necessary hold your child so they cannot move by wrapping your arms around them without hugging them. You may need to repeat quiet time a number of times during a trip. Remember each occasion when you resume walking to praise your child when they stay close.

Of course if they continue to struggle you will probably have to return home and try again next time.

Dr. Matthew Sanders is a clinical psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia and founder of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program.

For local resources on Positive Parenting support for common behavior issues such as tantrums, whining, disobedience, bedtime problems and more contact Raise & Shine at 707-463-1233 or visit www.raiseandshine.org for a schedule of free workshops, classes and private consultations in your area.