

WWPPD (What would Peter Pan do?)

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It's hard for me to believe, but my daughter, Sophia, is turning five next month. In my very subjective opinion, she's a smart, sweet, and sensitive kid whose major struggle centers around her need to be with me 24/7, and her desire to be independent and brave. My husband and I have tried to help her overcome her fears, but she's strong-willed and won't try anything new until she has determined that it's the right time. For example, until about six months ago, she hated having her hair washed because of her fear of getting water (and shampoo) in her eyes. For about a year, I had to push her booster chair into the bathroom and wash her hair in the sink as if she were in a beauty salon. One day, out of the blue, she announced that she'd wash her hair in the bathtub. I was relieved. I hated mopping up the wet bathroom floor after every salon treatment.

Just as I stopped resisting Sophia's plodding and gradual approach to overcoming her fears, she threw me a curve ball. Within the last few weeks, my little preschooler has transformed herself into a new person. Last summer she was so afraid of the ocean that she wouldn't even dip her toe in the surf until the last ten minutes of our two-week beach vacation. This past weekend, however, we went to the beach and before I could even ask her whether she wanted to go into the water, she ran into a little wave, dragging me by the hand. Not only that, but after her day of sun and sand, she decided to wash her own hair in the shower, not the bathtub, an event I was convinced would never take place.

Water isn't the only area that Sophia has done a complete turn-around. Two months ago, she was devastated that she couldn't get past the second ring on the monkey bars on the playground. This week she actually let me show her a trick and went all the way to the end of the rings by herself. Earlier this year, petrified to perform in front of others, Sophia cried while sitting on my lap through most of an open music class that was designed to show the parents just how much the kids had learned. Last week, she participated in the whole class with a big smile on her face, turning toward me every so often to give me a "thumbs up."

At first I thought all this recent bravery was due to the great year she had in Pre-K and the fact that her birthday was rapidly approaching. But yesterday it dawned on me that there's another, maybe even more important influence that has jumpstarted Sophia's courage: Peter Pan. Ever since she took the video of Peter Pan out of the library, the stage production starring Cathy Rigby, her little life has changed. Watching it 2-3 times per day has driven me stark raving mad, but the impact of the repetition is clear. Peter Pan is a boy played by a woman who is not afraid of anything. S/he is strong, s/he flies, s/he sings, s/he fights Captain Hook, s/he makes friends with Tiger Lily and the Indians, s/he takes care of Wendy and the Lost Boys, s/he is self-sufficient.

There's no doubt that Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Moses, Krishna etc. are all great role models for the spiritual life. But they're not as cute and accessible as Cathy Rigby. Toward the end of the movie, when asked who s/he is, Peter Pan says, "I'm youth. I'm joy. I'm freedom." The next time I'm afraid to try something new, I'm going to follow Sophia's example. I'll ask myself, "What Would Peter Pan Do?" and then, without thinking, I'll go ahead and do it.