



Advice for the Home Team Toolbox by Dr. Debi Warner

*Dear Dr. Debi,
Why don't kids build tree houses? Can we get ours interested?*

Signed, Lost in the Leaves

Dear Lofty Escape,

A tree house is a great place for thinking and getting perspective on yourself, your life, and whatever just happened that ran you out of the house. Somehow we see fewer of these natural treescapes any more. No wonder people are stressed. A tree house can help you regain your direction and set things right. So, let's get into it again!

Perhaps start by telling stories of your own tree house as you remember, or maybe ones you have heard of. Tell how you built it, where you got the stuff. How you stole the wood from Dad's new project and even the old falling down shed. How you dragged a magnet through the dirt to collect nails and then straightened them with a hammer on a big rock. And, share your advice to use a flat rock instead of the craggy one.

Tell you kids how you picked the tree. You made it far enough from the house to be hidden, but close enough to hear when dinner was ready. A big tree with spreading branches and good strength. How you spent time looking for a tree with some level branches that were parallel to each other and the ground, too. How you got permission, or got in trouble for picking the wrong tree. Each of these stories is an adventure and lesson for our kids.

Your kid will learn that you were not perfect, that you made do with found materials. That you got into trouble just like they do now. They will find out what kinds of punishments were in fashion then and how you eventually forgave your Dad for making you mad with his consequences. Explain what you learned in the process. And how he pitched in when your techniques failed and the structure nearly fell apart. How he changed from authority, to rescuer, then to pal over the course of the project.

As your kid may struggle on their own with the structure of their own tree house, they will learn about supports and stresses of materials. How far apart to place the crosspieces. What is the sway for a board spanning that space. They won't get this from a book, but will learn by placing and stretching the materials as

they put weight across the spans. Their senses will detect the material mechanics, absorb the interaction between force, distance, and movement. Complex mathematics and physics will take life inside their brains as they internalize the characteristics of the wood and spans they handle.

They will fall and hurt their knee. They will learn caution and that your advice is worthy.

They will learn many such things just by taking armfuls of wood out and exploring their yard on their own. Can you actually let them do it? Consider – did you always have 100% supervision in your own adventures? It is an exercise in your trust on your end to let them learn. Or, is it easier to know they are safe by the computer or TV? You decide.

You develop an interplay of communication as they commence building. You try not to be nosy or bossy, but find a reason to wander by. You ask a few questions and ask if you can touch what is in place. You are careful not to crush their project or their feelings, as you tentatively place your toe on the crosspiece.

As you press a bit, you let their senses absorb the character of the stress on the structure. Their face sours as they realize it is too weak to hold humans. Your heart pounds while you panic, imagining your precious kid traversing that poorly strung together tree stand. Your eyes meet. They appreciate you not scolding or prohibiting further work.

Ah, you sit and consider it together. This is a great moment to teach problem solving thinking and alternate solutions. Calmly you sit and look at the structure. Sadly you both lament the situation. You suggest a slight change and ask what else could be done? The child's wheels are turning in their head; you see the smoke so indicating. You ask, "Are you thinking it too?" You give plenty of space for fragments of thoughts.

By the time you are done with your exchange, neither of you remembers who finished which solution. This is brainstorming at it best, with fertile minds fueled by near failure. The rush of joy at a better solution brings pride and new confidence to a young builder.

You sneak out when they are in bed and place a few needed supports, but hide them well, and make sure their own work is prominent. They make a sign the next day, "Kids only." You smile; life is right again.

Happy Home Team!

Dr. Debi

Dr. Debi Warner is the Founder of Renovation Psychology® radio host, and author of the book, Putting the Home Team to Work, available now online at RenovationPsychology.com. Dr. Debi provides advice for greater domestic harmony to folks who are renovating their home – for True Home Improvement. This column is offered for enjoyment and enhancement and is not intended to replace your personal medical care. Photo by Bob Jenks, St. Johnsbury, Vt.

Dr. Debi has a consultation practice, from her studio in Littleton, NH, with house calls all over the East coast.

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