# A green and white logo Description automatically generatedA close-up of a logo Description automatically generatedThe Independent Living Advocate’s Toolkit for Mentoring Families of Children with Disabilities

## Brief #8: Boundaries, Self-Trust, and Dignity of Risk

Life has risks. Accidents, diseases, and emotional hurt can happen to anyone. People with disabilities, however, can be vulnerable to these things in a way that non-disabled people aren’t. As a result, fear for safety and security can easily become the focus of parenting. Risks are real and they shouldn’t be discounted. But they must never be used to strip someone of their dignity. IL Advocates play a growing role in modeling to families how people with disabilities can live full lives while safely navigating the risks around them. Here are some of the especially impactful ways that can be shared with families:

1. Build skills in planning for how to avoid or escape a crisis. Knowing how and when to call 911 (988 for mental health crisis), steps to take in case of a fire, and basic first aid are essential to know. But there may be specific disability-related things that need planning and preparedness. Develop a plan for various situations and practice the action steps.
2. Teach the importance of having boundaries and how to set them. Boundaries can be physical, mental, and emotional. Disabled children are sometimes touched without asking permission. A child or youth who uses personal assistance or supported decision making may get confused about the appropriate limits of touching or control by others. Self-determination means being in control of your own body and space and knowing you can say “no,” “please don’t touch me like that,” or “please speak directly to me.” Sometimes it means making the choice to leave an environment or social situation that’s harmful.
3. Enable self-trust. Self-awareness builds self-trust and families can enable self-trust by encouraging children to believe in what they know about their own bodies, minds, and emotions. Just because something doesn’t work for the adults, doesn’t mean it doesn’t work for the child. Self-trust allows the child’s creativity to come forward more easily.
4. Maximize accessibility of the environment. A home, school, workplace, program, or activity that’s inaccessible can be non-functional at best and dangerous at worst. Know and teach about accommodations and modifications so the maturing child can become a self-advocate in any environment.
5. Allow learning experiences. Most people learn best by experiencing things first-hand rather than someone lecturing them about it. As a disabled child matures and gains more self-awareness and self-trust, their good judgment about safety will also grow.
6. Support involvement in peer mentoring and disability-led activities and events. Learning from youth with disabilities who have successfully transitioned to the next chapter of their life goals demonstrates possibilities, lessens fear, and builds confidence.

Skill building, planning, setting boundaries, and peer sharing will keep families focused on the dignity of risk rather than their fear and anxiety about “what could happen.”