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Raising a Kid Safely in the 'Hood

By: [Judith Matloff](#) ([View Profile](#))

My stomach sank the moment we arrived home from the hospital with our newborn baby. There in front of the house loitered the narcotics gang that ruled our street in Harlem.

First to step forth was the head of the drug crew. He offered stiff congratulations as he peered at our precious bundle. Then the one I feared most—a malodorous crack addict named Salami—let out a menacing yelp. “Oooh, he’s so pretty. Just like the Gerber baby! Watch out someone doesn’t steal him!”

As I began to hyperventilate, my levelheaded husband fixed his eyes ahead and advised me to get a grip on my mounting hysteria. “It’s going to be okay,” John insisted firmly. “Trust me.”

I didn’t believe him at the time. But John was right.

Raising a child in this inner city presented challenges, to be sure. At that time, seven years ago, this area was one of the worst anywhere in the U.S. for narcotics trading. On a given day, sixty drug dealers stood outside our front door hawking cocaine. My husband and I moved here because we couldn’t afford anything else. We were childless when we bought our brownstone and didn’t ponder what it would be like bringing up a kid next door to a crack house. Now we had to confront our predicament. But with some creativity and open minds, we have managed to bring up our son, Anton, safely in the 'hood.

First off, much is a matter of perception. What we anxious parents tend to forget is that little ones don’t have a clue what’s going on. Toddlers don’t realize that the guy passed out on the playground slide has overdosed. The kids simply notice that someone is taking a noon nap. For example, consider the time a hostile cocaine peddler spray-painted a threat as I wheeled Anton by in the stroller. I was scared, but not my toddler. All Anton fixated

on was the paint color, which happened to be one of his favorites.

“Orange!” Anton gurgled happily.

Later in the week, the little guy wasn't the least shaken when the police came round to probe the threat. As the lieutenant and I discussed the potential danger—which turned out to be nil—Anton beamed at the glint of the officer's handcuffs. The child apparently thought they were shiny toys. I doubt he even noticed the gun.

Of course, we'd rather that Anton not be exposed to crime and we keep an eagle eye on whoever hangs around the block. So do the grannies who closely watch proceedings on the pavement. Thanks to these matriarchs who use the sidewalk as an extension of their living rooms, our street is one of the last in New York City where kids can play outside safely. The ladies leap from their lawn chairs if any child runs into the road or talks to a stranger. I feel perfectly confident leaving Anton to sit without me on the front steps. No one is going to touch him with the mamas around.

Cops provide further vigilance. Areas like this with a bad rep tend to deploy a lot of officers on the beat, and ours are a particularly friendly bunch. Like firemen, these guys understand what makes little boys tick and Anton has enjoyed many a personal tour of police trucks. He can probably turn on a cop radio with his eyes closed and knows how to book a perp. While these may not be necessary life skills, they sure are fun for a second-grader.

This is not to say I don't have my worries. From the earliest age possible, I made Anton memorize our telephone number and 911. He's also picked up Spanish, the *lingua franca* in this Dominican neighborhood. The boy knows to scream bloody murder in two languages in case of trouble.

Not that there would be much opportunity, I suspect. Maybe we're lucky, but our local dealers tend to be family-oriented guys who don't use drugs themselves and discourage petty crime. Most do this line of work because it's an easy way to make money to send back home to Mama. Moreover, these fellows tend not to be violent towards the average citizen. Narcotics salesmen like these make as much as a corporate lawyer and are not going to want police pursuing muggers on their turf. Street justice is important here, too. I once saw five men pursue a purse-snatcher. They tackled him and held him down until the cops arrive. The same would go for anyone who hurt a little kid.

In any case, neighborhood is steadily improving as gentrification seeps up from nicer neighborhoods. The drug gangs have largely moved on and only a few guys loiter around the corner these days. Hopefully the pushers will all disappear before Anton enters impulsive adolescence.

Even if they're still around, we've developed an unlikely ally in childrearing. It turns out that Salami the scary addict actually has the kid's welfare at stake. He routinely sweeps up broken glass outside our house so that Anton doesn't cut himself while playing.

“I don't want the Gerber Baby to hurt himself,” Salami explained one day. “Gotta look after these kids.”

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