

What's the worst thing that could happen?

A few evenings ago as I was walking around our neighbourhood, I saw five children riding their bikes over a snow windrow which a city snowplow had piled up on one side of our street. The five children, three boys and two girls, were taking turns riding their bikes across the street and then, very slowly, up and over the windrow. Children on the windrow side of the street suggested to the rider the best place to try to cross. Just before starting across the windrow, the rider would ask: "What's the worst thing that could happen?" The other children would respond with suggestions like, "Your chain could get stuck in the snow as you go over the hill."

Because my work involves helping people learn to use questions to keep themselves and others safe, I was especially intrigued to hear these children repeatedly asking the question, "What's the worst thing that could happen?"

I had to learn more! Where did these children get the idea that a rider should ask this question each time he or she approached the windrow? One of the boys explained they were trying to learn how to control their bikes so they "wouldn't fall off their bikes at the slow speed" as they rode up one side of the windrow and down the other. The boy said that their teachers always asked questions and had told them that questions help students "learn better." One of the girls volunteered that they had decided they could improve their bike riding skills if the rider always asked this question at the start of each ride.

For these children, asking a question for learning was a great way not only to enhance their communication within the game but also to help them improve their riding skills and to keep themselves safe. I was impressed by how these children had transferred the importance of their teachers' questions to their own play as a tool for learning. I have often seen my own grandchildren and their friends ask questions when they are playing "school" and I've concluded that asking and answering questions is a very natural way for children and adults to interact with their environment. This simple children's game reinforced for me the importance and power of asking questions to keep oneself safe in many different situations throughout the day. And seeing the children's game showed me that children can learn a question-based, lifelong critical thinking safety strategy at an early age!

SafeThink™ is built on the foundation of asking questions . . . these children were practicing the essence of the SafeThink™ strategy!