

The Case for Free-Range Parenting



BETHESDA, Md. — ON her first morning in America, last summer, my daughter went out to explore her new neighborhood — alone, without even telling my wife or me.

Of course we were worried; we had just moved from Berlin, and she was just 8. But when she came home, we realized we had no reason to panic. Beaming with pride, she told us and her older sister how she had discovered the little park around the corner, and had made friends with a few local dog owners. She had taken possession of her new environment, and was keen to teach us things we didn't know.

When this story comes up in conversations with American friends, we are usually met with polite disbelief. Most are horrified by the idea that their children might roam around without adult supervision. In Berlin, where we lived in the center of town, our girls would ride the Metro on their own — a no-no in Washington. Or they'd go alone to the playground, or walk a mile to a piano lesson. Here in quiet and traffic-safe

suburban Washington, they don't even find other kids on the street to play with. On Halloween, when everybody was out to trick or treat, we were surprised by how many children actually lived here whom we had never seen.

A study by the University of California, Los Angeles, has found that American kids spend 90 percent of their leisure time at home, often in front of the TV or playing video games. Even when kids are physically active, they are watched closely by adults, either in school, at home, at afternoon activities or in the car, shuttling them from place to place.

Such narrowing of the child's world has happened across the developed world. But [Germany](#) is generally much more accepting of letting children take some risks. To this German parent, it seems that America's middle class has taken overprotective parenting to a new level, with the government acting as a super nanny.

Just take the case of 10-year-old Rafi and 6-year-old Dvora Meitiv, siblings in Silver Spring, Md., who were picked up in December by the police because their parents had dared to allow them to walk home from the park alone. For trying to make them more independent, their parents were found guilty by the state's Child Protective Services of "[unsubstantiated child neglect](#)." What had been the norm a generation ago, that kids would enjoy a measure of autonomy after school, is now seen as almost a crime.

Today's parents enjoyed a completely different American childhood. Recently, researchers at the University of Virginia conducted interviews with 100 parents. "Nearly all respondents remember childhoods of nearly unlimited freedom, when they could ride bicycles and wander through woods, streets, parks, unmonitored by their parents," writes Jeffrey Dill, one of the researchers.

But when it comes to their own children, the same respondents were terrified by the idea of giving them only a fraction of the freedom they once enjoyed. Many cited fear of abduction, even though crime rates have declined significantly. The most recent in-depth study found that, in 1999, only 115 children nationwide were victims of a "stereotypical kidnapping" by a stranger; the overwhelming majority were abducted by a family member. That same year, 2,931 children under 15 died as passengers in

car accidents. Driving children around is statistically more dangerous than letting them roam freely.

Motor development suffers when most of a child's leisure time is spent sitting at home instead of running outside. Emotional development suffers, too.

"We are depriving them of opportunities to learn how to take control of their own lives," writes Peter Gray, a research professor at Boston College. He argues that this increases "the chance that they will suffer from anxiety, depression, and various other mental disorders," which have gone up dramatically in recent decades. He sees risky, outside play of children among themselves without adult supervision as a way of learning to control strong emotions like anger and fear.

I am no psychologist like Professor Gray, but I know I won't be around forever to protect my girls from the challenges life holds in store for them, so the earlier they develop the intellectual maturity to navigate the world, the better. And by giving kids more control over their lives, they learn to have more confidence in their own capabilities.

It is hard for parents to balance the desire to protect their children against the desire to make them more self-reliant. And every one of us has to decide for himself what level of risk he is ready to accept. But parents who prefer to keep their children always in sight and under their thumbs should consider what sort of trade-offs are involved in that choice.

At a minimum, parents who want to give their children more room to roam shouldn't be penalized by an overprotective state. Cases like the Meitivs' reinforce the idea that children are fragile objects to be protected at all times, and that parents who believe otherwise are irresponsible, if not criminally negligent.

Besides overriding our natural protective impulses in order to loosen the reins of our kids, my wife and I now also have to ponder the possibility of running afoul of the authorities. And we thought we had come to the land of the free.