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‘Free-range’ parents loosen reins on kids

More independence, fewer stifling safety nets let kids thrive, they say

By [Helena Oliviero](#)
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No baby gates or cabinet locks confined Eden and Oriane Levin.

When they were toddlers, they roamed freely, as if their home were an open prairie. Their parents relied on the power of “no” to teach the youngsters which drawers were off limits.

Now Eden is 5; Oriane, a year younger. And they are as unfettered as ever, flying kites and riding bikes in their Sandy Springs neighborhood and walking to friends’ homes alone.

Eden and Oriane are “free-range kids,” a new moniker that describes the old practice of giving children lots of freedom to explore and grow. In the world of parents it’s a hot topic, the subject of talk shows and a recent book.

Free-range kids greet life without dayplanners. Their “enrichment activities” take place at parks and playgrounds. Their parents have grounded the proverbial helicopter in favor of giving their children more freedom and responsibility.

This free-range parenting is a backlash against a brand of modern parenting that mandates around-the-clock vigilance against any potential threat to safety or health. And it’s a philosophy challenging the notion that unless kids’ days are filled with structured activities, children will somehow fall behind.

For some parents, the concept goes too far and even puts children in harm’s way.

Last year, New York City columnist Lenore Skenazy created a stir when she wrote a piece about letting her 9-year-old son ride the subway home alone. A couple days later, she appeared on major TV shows, one titled, “America’s Worst Mom?”

Since then, Skenazy has developed a Web site coining the phrase “free-range kids” and written a book, “Giving Our Kids the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts With Worry.”

In doing so, she unleashed a debate about whether it’s healthy — or insane — to let kids play out of sight. Her Web site’s comments section reveals the divide. “Shame on you!” one comment read, followed by another saying, “You rock!”

Safety vs. smothering

For Barack Levin, parenting means letting your child reach for the sky, one branch at a time.

"Eden's new hobby is climbing trees. He wants to climb every tree. I let him. ... A lot of parents say, 'Oh, no, you shouldn't let him do that. He is going to fall and hurt himself,'" said Levin, who recently self-published the book, "The Diaper Chronicles," which outlines his parenting philosophy. "But I let him do it. I trust him."

Free-range parents stress they believe in helmets and car seats. But they think too many parents are smothering their children and preventing them from being resilient, independent problem solvers.

"We stayed out till the street lights came on, and our parents weren't scared every second," Skenazy told the AJC. "Kids and adults define themselves by what they do. 'I can ride a bike.' 'I made the fort myself.' 'I got lost on my way to choir practice but then found the right way again.' When we hold onto the bike handles for them or build the fort for them and drive them everywhere ... we've done it all for them."

Local parenting expert and radio talk show host Bob Lancer agrees children need more free time but he doesn't think free-range parenting is the solution.

"There is far too much structured 'doing' imposed on today's child, causing children to become chaotic, emotional, distracted," said Lancer, author of the book "Parenting with Love, Without Anger or Stress." "In today's world, however, children require more protectiveness than ever."

He said children today face many potentially dangerous influences — from violent TV shows to inappropriate images online to overly aggressive kids on the playground. Children shouldn't be allowed to walk down the street alone until they are at least 8 or 9, he said, and even then he's unsure it's a good idea.

"You never know who is lurking on the street. Pedophiles, kidnappers," he said. "I know it sounds paranoid, but you have to be today."

Free-range proponents cite statistics showing mortality rates for children have declined over the past 25 years, according to Child Trends, a nonprofit research group. And a 2002 study (the most recent one) by the U.S. Justice Department found stranger abductions are extremely rare — a total of 115 a year.

But when they do occur, Skenazy said, the tragedies get incessant coverage on 24-hour cable news and the internet, feeding safety fears.

Stacy DeBroff, author of several parenting books, said it's just not wise to be cavalier. Mothers used to be home, available to help a child with a scraped knee or to spot unsavory characters.

Supervised, after-school activities have become more necessary with more moms working today. And there are new hazards, she said, including increased traffic.

Still, DeBroff and Lancer agree parents also can be overly protective, stepping in too soon to settle a playground squabble or not letting a child figure out a math problem on his own.

In many cases, free-range parents want their children to spend less time in soccer practices and piano lessons and more time simply playing outside.

About 90 percent of parents said children spend less time playing outside than they did when they were growing up, according to a Harris Poll commissioned this year by Kaboom, a nonprofit organization that builds playgrounds.

About 80 percent of those parents said their children should spend more time playing outside.

“We have 9-year-old kids who don’t know how to ride a bike because the parents are too scared to let them ride their bikes,” said Debbie Braun, owner of The Goddard School in the Crabapple neighborhood of Alpharetta. “And we have parents who say, ‘Will you teach them to ride? And while I feel like it’s a wonderful opportunity for us, it does say something about the opportunities kids have for the free range and unstructured experience.’”

Kristin Moore, a social psychologist with Child Trends, cautions against a one-size-fits-all approach to parenting and recommends parents consider several factors in deciding an appropriate level of supervision for their child.

“I would not recommend either extreme position,” she said. “There are lots of things to consider: the age of the child, what’s your neighborhood like? What’s the child like? Is he cautious and careful or not?”

Parental paranoia

Looking across the street to a vacant lot, Laurel Snyder struggles with whether to let her 4-year-old son, Mose, venture into the thickets.

“When I was little, it would be a fairyland, and I would be swinging on the vines and digging in the dirt,” said Snyder, who lives in Atlanta. “But now, it’s like, ‘What about poison ivy or snakes or there could be a syringe?’ We see danger in everything.”

Snyder isn’t sure she fully buys into the free range philosophy but she wants to make steps in that direction.

“Not everything can be nontoxic,” she said. “Kids have to learn how to live in a toxic world.”

As a child, Snyder, her siblings and some of her pals walked two miles down busy streets to a public library, where she stayed reading and playing for hours until her parents picked up her.

Snyder was recently at a community garden when her son decided to play in a creek barely deep enough to cover his feet. Snyder was right there, but one mom was stunned she would let her son go barefoot in the creek. There could be broken glass. The water could be contaminated.

“And she looked at me and said, what about flash floods?” said Snyder. “And I was like, ‘It’s not even raining!’”

Snyder is an author of children’s books, including “Any Which Wall,” which is set in Iowa where children (sans adults) stumble upon a mysterious wall (and lots of magic) in the middle of cornfields.

She wants to set her next book in Atlanta, but she's unsure.

"How do I let an 11-year-old girl have an adventure in the city if I can't let my own kids do it?" she says.

For now, she will let her son check out the lot.

"So I wouldn't allow my son to cross the busy street, but I could walk him over there and let him play," said Snyder. "The resilience and imagination and creativity you have to learn to live your life must outweigh the risks of breaking a finger."

At home with free-range

Adopting a free-range philosophy doesn't mean being completely hands off, but it does mean giving your child more freedoms and responsibility. Here are five steps in that direction:

1. Turn off the TV and have your kids go outside to play and entertain themselves. It's OK to supervise, but no hovering.
2. Give your child chores around the house. A 2-year-old can help sort laundry into whites and colors. By 4, kids can help set the table. And by second grade, children can make their own lunches and take out the garbage.
3. Let your child drop an afterschool activity that you pushed if the child really doesn't want to do it anymore.
4. Let your middle-schooler crack — and cook — eggs.
5. Stop googling "toxic" and "childhood" and "guilt" and other words that cause you to worry.

Source: Author Lenore Skenazy

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