



Parenting Advice From ‘America’s Worst Mom’

By [Jane E. Brody](#)

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Photo



Credit Joyce Hesselberth

Jane Brody on health and aging.

Lenore Skenazy, a New York City mother of two, earned the sobriquet “America’s Worst Mom” after [reporting in a newspaper column](#) that she had allowed her younger son, then 9, to ride the subway alone.

The damning criticism she endured, including a threat of arrest for child endangerment, intensified her desire to encourage anxious parents to give their children the freedom they need to develop the self-confidence and resilience to cope effectively with life's many challenges.

One result was the publication in 2009 of her book "Free Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts With Worry)." A second result is the [Free Range Kids Project](#) and a 13-part series, starting Thursday on Discovery Life Channel, called "[World's Worst Mom](#)." In it, Ms. Skenazy intervenes to rescue bubble-wrapped kids from their overprotective parents by guiding the children safely through a sequence of once-forbidden activities and showing their anxious parents how well the children perform and how proud they are of what they accomplished.

The term "helicopter parents" applies to far more than those who hover relentlessly over their children's academic and musical development. As depicted in the first episode of the series, it applies to 10-year-old Sam's very loving mother who wouldn't let him ride a bike ("she's afraid I'll fall and get hurt"), cut up his own meat ("Mom thinks I'll cut my fingers off"), or play "rough sports" like skating. The plea from a stressed-out, thwarted Sam: "I just want to do things by myself."

In an interview, Ms. Skenazy said, "Having been brainwashed by all the stories we hear, there's a prevailing fear that any time you're not directly supervising your child, you're putting the child in danger." The widespread publicity now given to crimes has created an exaggerated fear of the dangers children face if left to navigate and play on their own.

Yet, according to [Peter Gray](#), a research psychologist at Boston College, "the actual rate of strangers abducting or molesting children is very small. It's more likely to happen at the hands of a relative or family friend. The statistics show no increase in childhood dangers. If anything, there's been a decrease."

Experts say there is no more crime against children by strangers today — and probably significantly less — than when I was growing up in the 1940s and '50s, a time when I walked to school alone and played outdoors with friends unsupervised by adults. "The world is not perfect — it never was — but we used to trust our children in it, and they learned to be resourceful," Ms. Skenazy said. "The message these anxious parents are giving to their children is 'I love you, but I don't believe in you. I don't believe you're as competent as I am.' "

Dr. Gray, author of "[Free to Learn](#): Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life," said in an interview, "If children are not allowed to take routine risks, they'll be less likely to be able to handle real risks when they do occur."

Case in point: His college's counseling office has seen a doubling in the rate of emergency calls in the last five years, "mainly for problems kids used to solve on their

own,” like being called a bad name by a roommate or finding a mouse in the room. “Students are prepared academically, but they’re not prepared to deal with day-to-day life, which comes from a lack of opportunity to deal with ordinary problems,” Dr. Gray said. “Over the past 60 years, there’s been a huge change, well documented by social scientists, in the hours a day children play outdoors — less than half as much as parents did at their children’s ages,” he said.

In decades past, children made up their own games and acquired important life skills in the process. “In pickup games,” Dr. Gray said, “children make the rules, negotiate, and figure out what’s fair to keep everyone happy. They develop creativity, empathy and the ability to read the minds of other players, instead of having adults make the rules and solve all the problems.”

Dr. Gray links the astronomical rise in childhood depression and anxiety disorders, which are five to eight times more common than they were in the 1950s, to the decline in free play among young children. “Young people today are less likely to have a sense of control over their own lives and more likely to feel they are the victims of circumstances, which is predictive of anxiety and depression,” he said.

There are also physical consequences to restricting children’s outdoor play because there are no adults available to supervise it. Children today spend many more hours indoors than in years past, which in part accounts for the [rise in childhood obesity and Type 2 diabetes](#). Many elementary schools have even canceled recess, believing it is time better spent cramming children’s heads with facts and figures.

“Childhood should be a time of freedom and play, not building a résumé for college,” Dr. Gray said.

As Ms. Skenazy put it, “if parents truly believe children must be supervised every second of the day, then they can’t walk to school, play in the park, or wake up Saturday morning, get on their bikes and go have an adventure.”

Some 2,000 families were screened by the Discovery Life Channel to find 13 families crippled by anxiety yet willing to have an intervention. “The parents weren’t easy pushovers,” Ms. Skenazy said. “Some were very unhappy to see me at first. But once pride in what their children achieved replaced their fears, they were ecstatic — relaxed and happy instead of crippled with fear.”

Ms. Skenazy spent four days with each family, introducing a different challenge each day. Sam learned to cut cheese and slice a tomato with a sharp knife and then made sandwiches for his parents. He also learned to ride a two-wheeler.

“I don’t guarantee I’ll take away all their worry, just give them the confidence to loosen the reins on their kids,” she said. “Kids need roots and wings. Parents give them roots. I give them wings.”

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