

Back to Basics: Raising an 'unhurried child'

## The free-range child

**No flash cards. No swimming lessons at three months. No hand-holding. Just a whole lot of unstructured time. A growing number of parents are espousing a radical philosophy: It's time our children got some life skills by actually living**

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Cleone Grasham's days of shuttling her three daughters hither and yon to sports, choir and other organized activities are over.

The Toronto mother has scaled it back to one gymnastics class for one of her kids – and that's it.

“It was wearing on everybody,” says Ms. Grasham of her family's once-packed schedule.

“Everything was late and dinner was always rushed, and by the end of the day no one seemed to have done as much as they had wanted to do.”

For one thing, school offerings such as plays and community service projects already keep her kids, 6, 10 and 11, busy.

But with her own fond childhood recollections of simply playing soccer in the park until calls of “Dinner!” summoned her home, Ms. Grasham is actively embracing a gleefully retro rethink of the condition of the modern child.

As so-called hyperparenting continues to dominate modern childrearing with its flash cards, over-programming, hovering and handholding, a number of conscientious objectors are taking a big step back.

They are not slacker parents – they don't celebrate 3 p.m. martinis and serve Happy Meals for dinner.

But they are returning to a parenting style in which kids' time is filled with free play, unsupervised activities and plenty of downtime. Some call it free-range parenting.

In his new book *Under Pressure: Rescuing Childhood from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting*, Canadian philosopher and writer Carl Honoré wrestles with his own well-intended overparenting and taps into a number of schools and families inspired by the free-range child.

At the same time, New York journalist Lenore Skenazy has found herself at the centre of a grassroots movement sparked by her controversial decision to let her nine-year-old son ride the subway alone.

The blog she created to handle the commotion, Free Range Kids, has attracted more than 100,000 visitors since she started it at the beginning of last month. Many are like-minded parents sharing their own rein-loosening stories.

“It's a conscious desire to not be quite so conscious,” Ms. Skenazy says.

But it's a tough collective habit to break, says Mr. Honoré, whose previous book, *In Praise of Slow*, was about the Slow Movement.

“Hyperparenting is a kind of bizarre cultural perfect storm,” he says in a phone interview. “All these remarkable and in themselves not evil trends have come together to produce the moment of collective hysteria about children and collective panic that touches everything we do with childhood.”

On the one hand, he says, we're pushing kids to achieve academically and rack up life skills to prepare them for a competitive world. On the

other, we're holding them back by not allowing them freedom – to walk to school, to stay home alone – that previous generations enjoyed. With a growing swell of parenting experts to feed each impulse, parents can easily forget that childrearing is hardwired into them.

Beth Hayhurst, a mother of three in Victoria, can relate to the pull of child enrichment. For her first-born son, now 9, there were “swimming” at three months, art and music lessons, play groups, reading groups, sports. “I cringe,” she says now.

Partly abetted by a recent move from downtown Toronto to a sleepy hamlet outside Victoria, her children now spend most of their free time mucking about outdoors, or building an enormous free-form Lego city indoors. They do take swimming lessons, but otherwise Ms. Hayhurst and her husband follow their children's lead when it comes to organized activities.

“At times, they may ask to do something else, and if they request, we will sign them up,” she says.

The free-range approach isn't limited to playtime. Ms. Grasham has started to allow her eldest daughters to walk to school and back on their own. What would have been a no-brainer a generation ago – “When I was in Grade 2 I was going across the reservoir by myself to school,” Ms. Grasham says – has become a radical act. One parent said to her, “I don't know if I'd have the nerve to do it.”

Ms. Skenazy elicited a more hostile response when she allowed her son to ride the subway alone. She has become convinced that parents' focus on safety is about “living in an urban myth” as crime in many larger North American cities is either on the decline or holding steady. She cites a friend of hers who can barely survive a few minutes apart from her 12-year-old daughter at the mall when they split up to get food.

“She's 12. She's smart. She speaks English. She's not going to say, ‘Oh, you're offering me a free puppy? I guess I'll leave my mother and go with you into your car, strange man.’”

Although delivered with humour, Ms. Skenazy says her now-crusade actually empowers kids and protects them from failing later in life.

“You could be told all day long that you're perfect and great but you think, ‘Yeah, how come I never made myself breakfast? How come I never walked myself to school and how come I never was allowed to stay home alone for an evening? If I'm so smart, how come you're treating me like a two-year-old?’”

That hyperparenting may actually backfire may be the free-range movement's best hope of survival. Mr. Honoré cites studies that suggest that while all of the baby Mozart classes and language classes do appear to give an early leg-up to children at the kindergarten level, all kids even out in elementary school. The flash-card babies, however, are more anxious and less creative.

Elsewhere, Mr. Honoré documents outposts of free-range kids around the world and finds them flourishing. He cites an outdoor nursery called The Secret Garden in Scotland where kids can run free.

“It brings together so many of the anxieties and problems we're talking about and it seems to solve them in one fell swoop.”

But to let kids roam free, parents need to give up a degree of control. “A key part of parenting is uncertainty. I think we need to learn to feel comfortable in that uncertainty,” Mr. Honoré says.

Still, even the staunchest proponents of free-range childrearing can find it a challenge. Ms. Skenazy has only recently considered skateboards safe enough for her sons.

Even Mr. Honoré, who wrote a chapter on raising an “unhurried child” in *In Praise of Slow*, was not immune to micromanagement. When his son expressed an interest in drawing, he immediately started to “nurture” it, causing his now nine-year old son to comment, “Why do grown-ups have to take over everything?”

At the end of the book, Mr. Honoré tells of his son thinking about joining a drawing club at school. With great effort, Mr. Honoré does not weigh in on the exciting prospect of his son tapping a Tate Gallery-bound talent. His son thanks him for his restraint.

There's an addendum to that story. After the book was complete, Mr. Honoré's son told him he had decided to join the club after all.

“I resisted the urge to punch the air,” he says.

## LOOSENING THE REINS

The premise of raising a free-range child is to trust your instincts rather than rely on parenting experts. But here are a few pointers from parents on how to scale back:

**Free time:** How many nights a week do your kids just play? The lower the figure, the more you might want to consider cutting back on lessons and activities.

**Go retro:** Think of something you did in childhood that your child doesn't do, Lenore Skenazy suggests. Walking to the corner store or stopping to play at a friend's house *sans* escort is a good place to start.

**Set the rules:** Free-range doesn't mean freewheeling. Set a time for your children to be home for dinner after playing in the park.

**Spy if you must:** Your kid may be trustworthy, but you may be a wreck. Many free-rangers admit to following their newly freed children while “walking the dog” the first few times. And while Ms. Skenazy eschewed a cellphone for her 9-year-old subway-rider son, it may help your peace of mind.



Lucy Burns, 10, plays with her friend Katherine Smith at a playground in Toronto. Lucy's mother has cut down the number of organized activities her daughter participates in, allowing Lucy to enjoy more downtime. (*Arantxa Cedillo for The Globe and Mail*)