

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

# Let the Kid Be

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Published: May 29, 2009

**Perhaps you know** it by its other names: helicoptering, smothering mothering, alpha parenting, child-centered parenting. Or maybe there's a description you've coined on your own but kept to yourself: Overly enmeshed parenting? Get-them-into-[Harvard](#)-or-bust parenting? My-own-mother-never-breast-fed-me-so-I-am-never-going-to-let-my-kid-out-of-my-sight parenting?

There are, similarly, any number of theories as to why 21st-century mothers and fathers feel compelled to micromanage their offspring: these are enlightened parents, sacrificing their own needs to give their children every emotional, intellectual and material advantage; or floundering parents, trying their best to navigate a changing world; or narcissistic parents, who see their children as both the center of the universe and an extension of themselves.

But whatever you call it, and however it began, its days may be numbered. It seems as though the newest wave of mothers is saying no to prenatal [Beethoven](#) appreciation classes, homework tutors in [kindergarten](#), or moving to a town near their child's college campus so the darling can more easily have home-cooked meals. (O.K., O.K., many were already saying no, but now they're doing so without the feeling that a *good* parent would say yes.) Over coffee and out in cyberspace they are gleefully labeling themselves "bad mommies," pouring out their doubts, their dissatisfaction and their dysfunction, celebrating their own shortcomings in contrast to their older sisters' cloying perfection.

After all, that is the way it is with parenting — which I bet was never used as a verb before the 20th century, when medicine reached the point where parents could assume their babies would survive. At its core, raising children is about instinct and biology, yes, but on top of that, we build an artificial scaffold, which supports what we have come to think of as parenting truths but are really only parenting trends.

Going way back, the Spartans probably thought they were oh, so modern when they left defenseless infants on wild mountain slopes. So did wealthy Norse mothers who had poor women foster their children, and European aristocrats who employed wet nurses. More recently, as Ann Hulbert chronicles in her book "Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children," rigid feeding schedules were all the rage in the United States in the 1920s. The next two decades brought an emphasis on discipline.

In 1946, Dr. Spock came along and told parents to trust their instincts. Later, parents became buddies with their kids, and by the end of the last century, the debate was about the quality versus the quantity of time spent with your children. That was followed by the concept of mothering as an all-

consuming identity. Mothers chose their gurus — T. Berry Brazelton (touchy-feely parenting), William Sears (attachment parenting) and John Rosemond (Christian parenting) — then diligently wore their babies in slings and nursed them into toddlerhood, all the while judging (and feeling judged by) those who did not do the same.

After a decade of earnest immersion in parenting, though, the times are ripe for a change. The first sign was the wave of confessionals — from anonymous Web sites like [truumomconfessions.com](http://truumomconfessions.com) (where mothers admit to transgressions like feigning stomach cramps to steal quiet time hiding in the bathroom) to bylined blogs like the wildly popular [dooce.com](http://dooce.com) (where Heather B. Armstrong chronicled her postpartum depression and continues to write about her struggles as the mother of a charming but somewhat high-strung 5-year-old) to memoirs like Ayelet Waldman's (in which she cops to such "sins" as using disposable diapers and loving her husband more than her children).

But in the past few months, a second wave has taken hold — writers are moving past merely venting and are trying to gather the like-minded into a new movement. Carl Honoré is one. He calls it "slow parenting" — no more rushing around physically and metaphorically, no more racing kids from soccer to Suzuki. Lenore Skenazy is another. She calls it "free-range parenting," a return to the days when childhood was not ruled by the fear (overblown, she says, with statistics to prove it) that children would be maimed, kidnapped or killed if they did something as simple as riding their bikes alone to the park.

By far the most chipper is Tom Hodgkinson, whose book "The Idle Parent: Why Less Means More When Raising Kids" was just published in England, and whose cover — Mum and Dad lounging with martinis while their well-trained toddler sits on the floor mixing up the next batch — illustrates his message that parents should just chill. Pay attention to your own needs, he writes, back off on your children and everyone will be happier and better adjusted.

All this certainly dovetails nicely with new economic realities. When you can't afford those violin lessons or a baby sitter to accompany your 10-year-old to the park, you can turn guilt on its head and call it a parenting philosophy. But is it fundamental change? Or is the apparent decline of overparenting (and its corollaries: feelings of competition and inadequacy) actually the same obsession donning a new disguise?

The one constant over the past century has been parents' determination to find the right answers when it comes to raising their children. In this latest chapter, we have replaced the experts who told us what a good parent worries *about* with experts who tell us that a good parent doesn't worry so *much*. We may even see parents stop aiming to prove how perfect they are and start trying to prove how nonchalant they are. But worry is worry. The search to keep from messing up goes on.

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