

Can you trust yourself to be a free-range parent?

I found it interesting that my last column about allowing children to be bored and unsupervised got very positive feedback from the older generation. I don't know whether that means younger parents don't respond or that my suggestions seem impossible or unrealistic for this day and age.

Since then I read an interesting article in the NY Times Magazine about the popularity of author Jodi Picoult. It seems that her attention to children in perilous situations together with the life alterations forced on their relatively normal, caring parents has hit a vein. Is that because of our collective fear about the vulnerability of children and their potential fates? Or is it because we as parents fear our inadequacies more now than in the past. The writer of the NYT article says, "The more we seek to protect our children, the more we fear the consequences of an inability to do so."

As the media fills us with stories of kidnapped, abused or terminally ill children, our fear meters spasm with our catastrophizing. Truth be told, the incidents we read about are few and far between. But tell that to a parent with a tender, innocent child. We even know what houses sexual predators live in.

The imperiled child has not always held such focus. But today's parenting culture is hard pressed to relax and allow children to roam free. We all have stories about the adventures from our childhoods when summers meant home by dinnertime. But now with children of our own we say, "It's so different today. I could never let my children do that."

What has changed? Is it a rise in actual incidents of trouble or is it the flames of fear in us that are fanned by the media? Is it that children are susceptible to more and more hair-raising struggles or is it that the sexual abuse story in a California preschool and 9/11 have left us so much more vulnerable in their wake? Television and movie producers especially capitalize on parents' worry. Children have always been society's vulnerable victims. They are dependent on parents for more years than any other mammal. But our "mother bear" population has significantly increased in the last twenty years. Where will this population explosion leave us? Ironically, with emerging

young adults more vulnerable and less capable than ever. We have an abundance of books on the shelves warning us about hyper-parenting, helicopter parenting and every new fad term to define the protective bubbles we are trying to put our children in.

The NYT article puts forth the notion that “the whole cultural machine devoted to maniacal worry about children often seems like a reflection of our collectively sublimated ambivalence about having children to begin with.” Does parenting leave us feeling so inept, so out of the control of our children’s safety, so unqualified to place our children on a successful life track that we don’t want the responsibility? Is the exhaustion of day-to-day parenting and the worry about who they will become not worth it? Have we become more and more obsessed with watching and reading about imperiled children worse off than our own so we can feel some semblance of competence?

I haven’t read it yet but I just learned of a book whose title I love—*Free-Range Kids: Giving Our Children the Freedom We Had Without Going Nuts with Worry* by Lenore Skenazy. I’m sure I would recommend it! We have to start with our fears because the more we worry, the more our children either absorb that worry or reject it wholeheartedly. I hear more today about children suffering from some form of anxiety than I did ten, even five, years ago. If we want strong, capable children, they need to experience us seeing them as strong and capable.

So I still plead my case. Even in the undertow of what we are presented with on our screens and in print, I implore you to give your children the chance to become strong and independent, to explore their woods and to make up their own games without the overseeing of adults. Give them the chance to discover their own world, not the world we so fearfully try to protect them from. Let them catch the frogs and the mice and even bring them in the house. Allow them the inspirations that are already in their heads but require some quiet boredom to blossom. Teach them the simplicities of life, the beauty in the little things—ants and flowers, cracks in sidewalks and shapes of clouds that inspire imagination. They don’t learn this under the coaching of the Karate master, the swim instructor, the Pop Warner coach, and the ballet teacher—other things, yes, but the little things are there to be found by them alone.

