



MAYBE YOU DON'T ALLOW YOUR TWEEN TO WALK TO THE CORNER STORE OR BIKE TO A FRIEND'S HOUSE ALONE. BUT LETTING KIDS ROAM A LITTLE FREER, WITH A BIT LESS SUPERVISION, IS NOT ONLY FUN FOR THEM—IT HELPS MAKE THEM STRONG IN UNIQUE AND IMPORTANT WAYS.

By Elizabeth Foy Larsen

T

he stars have started to pop through the sky on a warm evening in Minneapolis, and almost everyone on our residential street has either gone inside or retreated to the mosquito-free comfort of their screened-in porches. That is, everyone except my kids, Peter, 12, Henrik, 10, and Luisa, 7, who are dashing down the sidewalks with flashlights. Or at least that's what I imagine they're doing. Because I'm not with them, I can't say for certain if they are spraying water into a mud pit, or building a fort, or even pounding each other with water balloons.

Photo: Brand New Images/Getty Images

That my children are outside by themselves isn't some isolated kids-gone-rogue event. My family operates on a sliding scale of independence pegged to each child's confidence and common sense. As long as Peter can find a friend to tag along, he's allowed to explore the lakeshore a few blocks away or bike to the convenience store. Henrik can wander anywhere on our block and cross the two streets that don't have a lot of traffic. Luisa walks to her friend's house two doors down. All three get home from the bus stop together without me there to meet them. My husband, Walter, and I moved here precisely because it is safe enough for them to enjoy these solo forays, which we believe are good for them.

We're in a tiny minority, though. Today most kids' lives are monitored 24/7, and independent wanderings exist only in the pages of *Little House on the Prairie*. Nearly a third of San Francisco Bay Area parents cite safety as the reason they drive their 10- to 14-year-old children to school rather than let them walk or bike unsupervised, according to one survey. When a Mississippi 10-year-old was seen making his way alone to soccer practice a few years back, anxious moms called 911. Other hallmarks of relaxed childhood are also disappearing. Paper routes? Many news companies demand that you be at least 18.

That's a huge shift from the 1970s, when I was allowed—encouraged—to ride my bike and take the city bus all over Minneapolis. In those days, parents accepted lumps and bumps as part of childhood, says Helene Guldberg, Ph.D., author of *Reclaiming Childhood* (Routledge). But as any mom who has ever gotten the stink eye from a stranger knows, that live-and-let-live spirit has been replaced by a widespread belief that every childhood mishap is the parents' fault. "There's this myth that we can prevent anything bad, from disappointment to death, if we only watch our children more carefully," says New York City's Lenore



Skenazy, a blogger and author of *Free-Range Kids* (Jossey-Bass), who was labeled "America's worst mom" when she blogged about letting her 9-year-old son take the subway alone.

Adding fuel to the fire, many parents have bought into the idea that the world is full of predators waiting to harm our kids. But the fact is U.S. violent crime rates have plummeted almost 50% since they peaked in 1992. And the number of children who are kidnapped or murdered each year is so small that every case makes big news. Of course, even one tragedy is one too many. And sure, my heart pounds harder whenever I call out the front door, expecting them to be right outside, and nobody answers. Then I remind myself that some 200,000 kids age 14 and under are injured every year in car accidents, yet my family still logs plenty of hours in our minivan.

The numbers don't support keeping my three on a short leash, but that doesn't mean we let them run wild. Peter's trips to the store required several test runs with me in tow, and before Luisa knew the drill, I called my neighbor to make sure she arrived safely. And I wouldn't be allowing any of these outings if I didn't believe my kids were capable of handling them.

Walter and I also factored in expert evidence that says too many restrictions would be harmful. If my three always had be within my sight, for example, they'd spend a lot more time indoors just so I could plow through my to-do list. "Getting outside gives them infinite opportunities to explore," says Todd Christopher, author of *The Green Hour* (Roost Books). Tethered to me, they'd have fewer chances to hang out with pals and engage in creative play, which is crucial for developing constructive problem solving, creativity and critical thinking, says Susan Linn, Ed.D., author of *The Case for Make Believe* (New Press). And unmonitored friend time, even if it's rowdy and chaotic, is a vital part of childhood, adds Stuart Brown, M.D., the founder of the National Institute for Play. "At these times kids start to know themselves and how they relate to others," he says.

That's why I try not to interfere unless I can hear that things are truly getting out of hand. Of course, my absence has ensured that our yard is the most popular hangout in the neighborhood—a fact that has not gone unnoticed by the well-meaning moms who perhaps think they're doing me a favor by standing guard at our play structure. What these moms don't understand is that I am listening, albeit from a distance. If one of my kids has strayed past his or her boundaries or is breaking any of our family rules—bullying,

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Freedom has to be earned and learned. Help your kids—and yourself—feel safer as they move out of your orbit.

Start with the facts.

Don't base decisions on feelings. Find out exactly what real hazards there are in your neighborhood.

Know your kid.

If she follows through on tasks, owns up to mistakes and tends to look before she leaps, you're probably safe saying yes when she asks to ride her bike to the park, have her curfew extended or go to the mall with a friend.

Practice.

Go with your son to the bus stop until he gets the hang of it and tells you he feels comfortable doing it on his own.

Power down.

If your kids call constantly for your advice (Lenore Skenazy's son once rang her from home to ask if he should eat another piece of banana bread), try turning off your cell phone for at least part of the day, to allow them the chance to make independent decisions.

Dial back fear.

People who watch more news and violent dramas on TV tend to see the world as more dangerous than it is. Skip the graphic shows in favor of less frightening fare.

Go easy on others.

The next time a kid you know hurts herself or does something dumb, resist the urge to blame her mom. Even if our parenting styles differ, we're all in this together.



using bad language, destroying someone else's property—he or she has to come inside immediately.

And when I let my kids back out, I do so with the confidence that I'm teaching them to be less anxious about the world around them. Allowing Peter to go to the store without me tells him that I trust his judgment and teaches him how to handle unexpected situations. "If a kid gets lost on the way or loses his money," says Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions* (Jossey-Bass), "he gains real in-the-moment experience figuring out how to manage life, the single most important skill he can have." Giving Peter adventures also shows him that I think our community is safe and that the people he will come into contact with are—with a few exceptions, which we discuss—kind and decent.

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My reasoning is shared by even the staunchest child-safety advocates, including Patty Wetterling, who has already faced the worst. In 1989 her 11-year-old son, Jacob, was abducted on a rural Minnesota road and has never been found. In response, she helped launch her state's AMBER alert program. But Patty says, "Kids should be walking around smart, not scared. They should know what to do if somebody says or does something to them, then tell them to keep it secret."

Monitoring kids too closely, even when it's a well-meaning way to try to keep them safe, has ratcheted up their anxiety to unhealthy levels, according

to child development experts. "Overprotecting children keeps them from experiencing and resolving disappointment and failure," says Bernardo J. Carducci, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Indiana University Southeast. "Kids who don't learn to handle frustration become fearful. They're the teenagers who won't try new extracurricular activities. When they arrive at college, they retreat to their rooms and play video games rather than going out and connecting with others."

I'd be lying if I said my husband's and my approach to independence is always an unqualified success. Last summer I was working late in my home office while Walter was putting Luisa to bed. That's when Henrik and Peter decided it would be fun to spritz several of our neighbors' garages with cooking spray. Walter caught them mid-high jinks, and the next morning the boys were marched to the neighbors' to apologize and clean up. Even though I was mortified, I knew the boys were learning firsthand about consequences at an age when the stakes were relatively low.

Still, the incident did give me a bad case of mom guilt. Was I failing my kids by not hanging out with them more? Richard Weissbourd, author of *The Parents We Mean to Be* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), says no. Overinvolved parents are often addressing their own need for closeness rather than giving kids the space they need. Being a supportive parent, in other words, can't always mean doing what's comfortable. It's also about bearing the anxiety and consequences that occur when your child strikes out for new territories.

Encouraging free-spiritedness also creates more opportunities for our kids to show us just how creative and resourceful they are. This came to mind a few days after the garage door incident when I turned into my alley and noticed handmade signs tacked on to the utility poles. "GARAGE DOOR CLEANING SERVICE," they read. "Call Peter and Henrik or just stop over." ●