

# “Free-Range Kids”? It Depends...

February 7, 2017

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By Alfie Kohn

Last October the *New York Times Magazine* published an article about a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who turned his backyard into an elaborate play space for neighborhood kids so they could “take risks and play rough and tumble” without adult supervision. No doubt many readers smiled and nodded to hear about a defender of outdoor play (Get those kids off their digital devices!) and common spaces (Let 'em hang out together whenever they want!), someone who was also taking a stand against the dreaded practice of helicopter parenting.

As the article continues, however, the picture grows more complicated. The father in question, a staunch libertarian, laughs off the writer's concerns about allowing young children to climb out on a roof with no grownup in sight. He also deflects an objection to what appears to be his son's bullying behavior. The very word *bully*, he apparently believes, is “used to pathologize normal, healthy, boyish aggression.” In his view, boys today “are being deprived of masculine experiences by overprotective moms, who are allowed to dominate passive dads.”

To be sure, not all proponents of what has come to be called the “free-range kid” movement share this particular ideological baggage. But whenever someone declares that parents today are coddling or restricting their children, and demands that they back off and let

kids roam free like in the old days – we would do well to consider what may lie behind such pronouncements.

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Are parents too protective? It's not an easy question to answer because a whole slew of variables are involved: Are we talking about all parents or only those who fit a certain demographic profile? How far in the past is our comparison period? With respect to what situations or perceived dangers are we defining "protectiveness"? (Do we really want to condemn as excessive the use of safety helmets, car seats, playgrounds designed so kids will be less likely to crack their skulls, childproof medicine bottles, baby gates at the top of stairs, and the like?)

Consider the value judgment built into the phrase "too protective": What one person condemns as excessive, another may regard as entirely appropriate – at least for some kids or in some situations. In fact, what you call excessive parenting when I do it with my children may be a lot easier for you to defend when you do it with yours. There's no simple answer to questions such as: How old must children be before they can be left home alone?

It would seem to be common sense, then, to say we should consider the specifics of the situation, and the needs, capabilities, and temperament of a particular child, before deciding whether it's prudent to let him or her do stuff alone. But not everyone does take this position.

On one side, some parents intervene not so much because their children need them to do so but because the *parents* need the children to need *them*. What's at issue here, notice, isn't the amount of protection or involvement – such that we could simply say, "Dial it back" – but the parent's *motive* for offering it. Thus, the solution isn't less parenting but better parenting.

On the other side is a one-size-fits-all commitment to *laissez-faire* parenting, a belief that kids should be less restricted. To some extent, this, like the invocation of freedom in other contexts, cuts

across political lines. Some groovy liberal folks cry, “Stop cramping kids’ style! Let them explore the world, make up their own games, walk home from school alone, climb tall trees, decide for themselves how to spend their time...”

But what seems to be the more pervasive sensibility behind calls to leave kids alone is an angry reaction to what’s perceived as overparenting, a sense of outrage over how kids supposedly have things too easy, how they haven’t *earned* their grades (or trophies or self-esteem), how they’re treated like “precious snowflakes” and shielded from the unforgiving real world that awaits them.

Threaded through this deeply conservative narrative – which by now seems to have become the dominant view of parenting (and of Millennials) in our society – are two hidden premises. First, kids ought to become self-sufficient as soon as possible: Independence, not interdependence, is the ideal. Second, the best way to prepare children for the frustration and unpleasantness they’ll eventually encounter is to make sure they experience plenty of frustration and unpleasantness while they’re young.[1]

Calls for moms and dads to back off are based on a combination of empirical beliefs (regarding the alleged prevalence and effects of overparenting) and value judgments (concerning how kids *should* be raised). I won’t dissect these at length here, or make the case that the empirical beliefs are largely unsupported, because I’ve already done so in my book *The Myth of the Spoiled Child* – and, with respect to widespread denunciations of “helicopter parenting” of college-age kids, in this article.

Instead, I’ll simply emphasize that children benefit from having parents who are closely connected to them and involved in their lives. According to a solid foundation of research, this is true not only in early childhood but through adolescence and beyond. Warnings about the harms of overparenting often gloss over the dangers of underparenting.

Furthermore, we ought to be suspicious of simplistic defenses of free-range kids. This position tends to ignore the complexity of deciding

when parental involvement is appropriate, and what kind is best. Should kids be left to their own devices? The only responsible answer is: Sometimes. It depends.

What should really set our antennae to quivering is the possibility that such proclamations about letting kids run free are based more on ideology – an antipathy toward anything that might be viewed as overparenting – than on what’s in the best interest of this particular child. Our primary imperative shouldn’t be “Do less for them.” Rather, we should be concerned about actively supporting their desire to have some say over their own lives without losing sight of our responsibility to keep them safe and happy.

#### NOTE

1. I call this “BGUTI” (Better Get Used To It), which also helps to explain why young children are subjected to homework, grades, and standardized testing. These things may offer no benefits, and even prove downright harmful, but, well, kids have to be made unhappy now to get them ready for all the unhappiness such practices will cause them later.

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