

GUEST ESSAY

This Simple Fix Could Help Anxious Kids

Sept. 4, 2023

By Camilo Ortiz and Lenore Skenazy

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A colleague in suburban Kentucky let his 12-year-old daughter walk two houses down to her friend's place. At the end of the play date, the other girl's mom walked her home, just to be safe.

Such excessive caution is hardly unusual — over the past several decades, children have become less and less independent. Instead of running outside to play after school or riding their bikes around "Stranger Things"-style, they're more likely to be indoors, on TikTok or in adult-run classes and organized sports.

Or, like the girl in Kentucky, protected from a danger that's all but nonexistent.

There are many reasons for this clampdown on kids, including the birth of cable TV in the 1980s, which evolved into round-the-clock internet news alerts, bringing a stream of scary news to parents. A gradual increase in homework started in the '80s, too, thanks to the fear that American kids were falling behind. And as the years went by, parents growing wary of a winner-take-all economy focused ever harder on getting their kids into college. They sprang for things like tutors and travel teams, giving kids a more curated, less autonomous childhood.

But as kids' freedom has been going down, their anxiety has been shooting up. The surgeon general has declared this "the crisis of our time." As a society, we've been trying everything from breathing exercises to therapeutic horse grooming to keep kids from shrinking from life.

While there could be many reasons our kids are suffering, what if the problem was simply that kids are growing up so overprotected that they're scared of the world?

If so, the solution would be simple, too: Start letting them do more things on their own.

This is exactly what the two of us have been studying. Lenore is a New York mom who let her 9-year-old ride the subway alone in 2008, wrote a column about it, got labeled America's Worst Mom and started the Free-Range Kids movement, which grew into Let Grow, a national nonprofit promoting childhood independence and resilience.

All the while, she has been monitoring the landscape of American childhood, talking to parents, teachers and kids, including 13-year-olds who've never been allowed to go to the park without an adult or run an errand or even cut their own meat. One 17-year-old told her he'd love to get pulled over for going 10 miles over the speed limit, because that, at least, would be on him. Alone, without parental help, he'd have to deal with the cop.

Camilo conducts research on treating kids with cognitive behavioral therapy. He also uses it in his practice and has witnessed the increase in children's anxiety since he started counseling them 15 years ago.

We both bemoan the fact that parents across the economic spectrum now believe that the more supervised, structured activities they can put their kids in, the better off they will be.

We think this constant supervision and intervention could be hurting kids' chances to become brave and resilient, and a recent *Journal of Pediatrics* article concurred. What's missing today isn't just the thrill of climbing trees or playing flashlight tag. It's that when an adult is always present — in person or electronically — kids never really get to see what they're made of. Kids should have a loving and secure relationship with their parents, of course. But if you think back to a time *you* were alone as a child and got lost or maybe fell off your bike, you probably still remember what happened next. You limped all the way home or asked a stranger for help. You managed. And that was a milestone.

Kids need a whole lot of those experiences. They are anxiety killers.

The Let Grow Project is a homework assignment we recommend schools give to students so they can learn to tackle more things on their own. The instructions tell kids to go home and ask their parents if they can do something new by themselves (or with a friend), like walk the dog, run an errand, make the family breakfast — just something they feel ready to do but haven't done yet.

Teachers and parents have told us that kids' confidence starts climbing when they participate. For instance, a seventh-grade boy pushed himself to go on a ride at Disney World — something he'd been too scared to do before. After braving the child-friendly Slinky Dog Dash, there was no stopping him: He went on ride after ride. Another seventh grader, a girl who was afraid to try out for the swim team, decided to start by walking to church by herself. That made her feel very grown up. Then she got her ears pierced (with her parents' permission). Then she started doing CVS runs for her mom, which made her feel responsible. And then, yes, she tried out for the swim team (and made it).

Sometimes the impact is a little goofier. Ever since her elementary school started doing the Let Grow Project, one principal told Lenore, "fewer kids are sticking their feet out."

"They'd been tripping each other?" Lenore asked.

No, said the principal, "fewer kids are asking their teacher to tie their shoes."

This was the dream of Let Grow: Give kids their independence and watch them blossom. But the uptake has not been as fast as Lenore would like. A lot of schools want data, not anecdotes.

Enter Camilo. He'd heard about Let Grow and offered to test independence as therapy in a clinical setting. He was already practicing exposure therapy, in which you have clients confront their fears. But this was a radical reconceptualization of the treatment. Instead of saying, "I hear you're afraid to sleep in your own bed — how about trying that tonight?" now he would ask, "What cool things would you like to do on your own?"

Using this technique, he and his doctoral student Matthew Fastman treated five patients, ages 9 to 14, who were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. And despite the kids' worries, it turned out there were many things they did want to try alone: Going to the grocery store. Taking the bus. One wanted to take his little brother to a carnival.

The intervention required five office (or Zoom) visits with the parents and child. The kids each did about 10 to 20 new things on their own.

The result was that all five children went from saying they felt worried most of the time to saying they felt worried a little bit of the time.

Statistically, this independence therapy worked better than drugs. And faster than cognitive behavioral therapy.

Of course, because it was a pilot study of just five kids, we can't make too much of the results. And it's doubtful any psychological intervention will ever work universally. But the results suggest that more study is merited. Now Camilo is planning a larger randomized controlled trial, and we hope others will begin researching how wide-ranging the benefits could be and what might be going on neurologically.

The beauty is that we don't have to wait for results before kids can try out more independence. The Let Grow Project is free, and so is Camilo's manual for clinicians.

Giving kids more freedom could be the cheapest, fastest and easiest way to give kids back the bounce they've lost.

Camilo Ortiz is an associate professor of psychology at Long Island University, Post, who runs a private psychology practice on Long Island. Lenore Skenazy is the president of the nonprofit Let Grow and the author of "Free-Range Kids."

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A correction was made on Sept. 5, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated the location of the Slinky Dog Dash ride. It is at Disney World, not Disneyland.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 22 of the New York edition with the headline: To Help Anxious Kids, Give Them More Freedom