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THE SATURDAY ESSAY

The Overprotected American Child

Why not let them walk to school alone? Parents and communities are figuring out ways to give their children more independence—and it just may help them to become less anxious, more self-reliant adults



By [Andrea Petersen](#)

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A few weeks ago I left my 9-year-old daughter home alone for the first time. It did not go as planned.

That's because I had no plan. My daughter was sick. My husband was out of town. And I needed to head to the drugstore—a five-minute walk away—to get some medicine for her. So I made sure my daughter knew where to find our rarely used landline phone, quizzed her on my cellphone number and instructed her not to open the front door for anyone. Then I left. Twenty minutes later I was back home. Both of us were a bit rattled by the experience—her first time completely alone, with no supervising adult!—but we were fine.

I had been postponing this moment of independence for my daughter for months, held back by worry over the potential catastrophes. But I know that this way of thinking is part of a larger social problem. Many have lamented the fact that children have less independence and autonomy today than they did a few generations ago. Fewer children are [walking to school on their own](#), riding their bicycles around neighborhoods or going on errands for their parents. There have been several high-profile cases of parents actually being charged with neglect for allowing their children to walk or play unsupervised. We're now seeing a backlash to all this pressure for parental oversight: Earlier this year, the state of Utah enacted a new “free-range” parenting law that redefined neglect to specifically exclude things like letting a child play in a park or walk to a nearby store alone.

Overzealous parenting can do real harm. Psychologists and educators see it as one factor fueling a surge in the number of children and young adults being diagnosed with anxiety disorders. According to a [study published this year](#) in the Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, the number of children aged 6 to 17 whose parents said they were currently diagnosed with anxiety grew from 3.5% in 2007 to 4.1% in 2012. And in a [2017 survey](#) of more than 31,000 college students by the American College Health Association, 21.6% reported that they had been diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems during the previous year. That is up from 10.4% in a [2008 survey](#).

A big [2007 study](#), published in Clinical Psychology Review, surveyed the scientific literature on how much parenting influences the development of anxiety in kids. The

parenting behavior that had the strongest impact of any kind was “granting autonomy”—defined as “parental encouragement of children’s opinions and choices, acknowledgment of children’s independent perspectives on issues, and solicitation of children’s input on decisions and solutions of problems.” More autonomy was associated with less childhood anxiety. (Genes play an even bigger role, however, in individual differences in anxiety.)

For children who are already anxious, overprotecting them can make it worse. “It reinforces to the child that there is something they should be scared of and the world is a dangerous place and ‘I can’t do that for myself,’ ” says Rebecca Rialon Berry, a clinical psychologist at the NYU Langone Child Study Center.

Annabelle Kim started walking to school without an adult at age 10. Now 15, she babysits her 9-year-old sister.

A lack of autonomy and independence can also stymie the development of self-confidence and may cause children to remain dependent on parents and others to make decisions for them when they become adults, says Jack Levine, a developmental pediatrician in New York. And because children naturally want more independence as they grow, thwarting that desire can cause them to become angry and act out, notes Brad Sachs, a family psychologist in Columbia, Md.

Like a lot of Generation Xers, I have my own memories of a carefree childhood riding bicycles and playing tag with other neighborhood children, my parents nowhere in sight. They seemed to trust their instincts. But today, how do you go with your gut when you’re bombarded by hyperventilating social media posts, shrill parenting advice books and a neurotic cultural tide? And what about disapproving neighbors—and spouses? My own husband wasn’t thrilled when I told him that I’d left our daughter home alone. “She could have hit her head. Or choked,” he said. (To be fair to him, both things have actually happened to her—and this is when we’ve been around.)

A handful of states have laws that specify minimum ages when it is legal, typically, for children to be left home alone. In Maryland, for example, it is 8; in Illinois, children under 14 can’t be left alone for a vague “unreasonable” amount of time. Other states give more general guidelines. But for many big independence milestones—such as taking public transportation alone or caring for younger siblings—there are few hard age recommendations.

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“Children mature and develop skills at different rates,” says Phyllis F. Agran, a pediatric gastroenterologist in Irvine, Calif., and the co-author of several of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ injury prevention policies. She notes that children with special needs, such as those with ADHD or developmental delays, may take longer to develop the impulse control and skills necessary to do some things independently.

Many financially struggling families may have no choice but to leave their children home alone while they work. And in high-crime neighborhoods, it may not be safe to send even older children out to play.

One independence milestone that has been studied extensively is crossing the street. Research has found that young children walking to school often don’t look for traffic or stop at the curb before stepping into the street. [Some studies have found](#) that parents are likely to overestimate their children’s ability to safely cross the street. A [paper published in 2000](#) in the British Journal of Educational Psychology found that, in general, 10- and 11-year-old children were much better than 7- and 8-year-olds at identifying safe places to cross and at detecting traffic and road dangers. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to wait until age 10 to allow children to walk to school, or anywhere else, without an adult.

Lenore Skenazy of Let Grow is trying to convince entire communities to give their kids independence.

Alan E. Kazdin, a professor emeritus of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University, recommends that parents repeatedly encourage independence in small, lower-stakes situations, like having children start homework on their own, do the dishes or choose a gift for a friend. While dishes and other chores may just seem like duties, they are also moves toward independence: Children need these skills, and the sense of mastery they engender, to become self-sufficient adults. These are “practice trials,” Dr. Kazdin says. He suggests that when children make these efforts, parents offer enthusiastic and specific praise, along with a pat on the back or a high-five. Issuing a good-natured challenge—“I bet you can’t make your sandwich all by yourself”—can also make it more likely that a child will follow

through. What doesn't work is nagging, issuing reprimands or punishing a child for not being more independent, he says.

Dr. Sachs encourages parents to involve their children in making decisions about their own path toward independence. When you ask children what they think about, say, staying home by themselves and then ask them to weigh risks and benefits, "it facilitates their self awareness," says Dr. Sachs. "They automatically start to make better decisions because they are thinking rather than just acting." This will serve them well when they face decisions about things with more serious consequences, like sex and alcohol.

It's also never too early to start encouraging independence, says NYU Langone's Dr. Berry. Children as young as 2 or 3 can start helping with chores, such as carrying a plate to the table and putting clothes in the hamper. Most 8-year-olds should be able to make scrambled eggs "with some gentle eyes on them," while most 10-year-olds can handle a chef's knife, she says. Parents first need to teach safe techniques, repeatedly, then assist with and monitor the activity before gradually "fading out."

Giving children more independence outside of the house can be more of a challenge—especially if you live in a neighborhood of worrywarts and you're the only parent letting your kid bike to the park alone. That's why Lenore Skenazy, a former journalist and mother of two now-grown sons, is trying to convince entire communities to give their kids independence with her nonprofit Let Grow. "It takes away the stigma of being a daredevil parent," she says.

A wallet-sized Let Grow "Kid Card" is meant to be carried by children when they are out on their own, to allay the fears of overly concerned adults.

Ten years ago, Ms. Skenazy started a blog entitled "Free Range Kids" after she faced a backlash over a newspaper column she wrote about letting her 9-year-old son ride the subway home alone in New York City. Ms. Skenazy says that having an entire community commit to children's independence can solve another potential problem, too: A dearth of other unaccompanied kids to play with. Otherwise, "everyone is in lacrosse or in the after-school chess club or some other structured activity," she says.

Michael J. Hynes, superintendent of the Patchogue-Medford Schools on Long Island in New York, launched a Let Grow project last fall because he was seeing "kids more and

more bubble wrapped as the years go on,” he says. “I’ve noticed they are averse to risk-taking.”

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The children in five of the district’s seven elementary schools now have one day when their only homework is to do something new. (Some classes also write about the experience.) Project suggestions, to do alone or with a friend, include walking the dog, exploring the woods and “playing night tag.” Let Grow also helps schools to launch Play Clubs in which children can play freely in the playground or gym before or after school. The organization suggests that schools enlist one adult to act as a “lifeguard” but otherwise let youngsters alone to figure out what and how to play—and to solve their own problems.

After nearly a year of the effort, Mr. Hynes says that he’s seen positive results in the district. “I can’t say test scores went up, but I believe the kids are better behaved and more self-confident. Students are taking risks in the classroom. Normally shy kids are now raising their hands.”

Related reading

- [How to Raise More Grateful Children](#)
- [The Right Way for Parents to Help Anxious Children](#)
- [Parents’ Dilemma: When to Give Children Smartphones](#)

When Jodi Della Femina Kim felt that her daughter, then age 10, was ready to get a cellphone and walk to school without an adult, she and her husband made the decision jointly with several other families in their Brooklyn neighborhood. For several weeks, Ms. Della Femina Kim walked a few steps behind her daughter. There were also rules: The phone had to be in the girl’s pocket (no texting while walking) and she couldn’t wear headphones (too distracting). Next, Ms. Della Femina Kim walked her daughter to a corner where they would meet the child’s friend. The kids would walk the rest of the way to school together. After several months, the children were allowed to walk the entire way—about four blocks—without an adult.

Her daughter, Annabel Kim, now 15, says that she was “very excited to get to walk to school myself. I felt like it meant you were finally growing up.” She continues to build her own independence by babysitting her 9-year-old sister and making dinner.

Anne Marie Albano, director of the Columbia University Clinic for Anxiety and Related Disorders in New York, reminds parents that the ultimate goal is to have their children be self-sufficient by the time they leave home for college or the workplace. She and her colleagues have come up with a list of milestones that adolescents should achieve before high-school graduation, including being able to advocate for themselves with teachers and other authority figures, seeing a doctor without a parent and waking themselves up in the morning on their own. “We have parents who call their college student at Harvard or Michigan and wake them up every morning,” she says. You do not want to be that parent.

A Path Toward Independence

- Age 2 to 3: Put dirty clothes in hamper; put toys away.
- Age 4 to 5: Feed pets; choose own clothes.
- Age 6 to 7: Make a sandwich (but no sharp knives, yet); take a bath unsupervised.
- Age 8 to 9: Use the stove to make a simple meal; help arrange playdates.
- Age 10 to 13: Wake up in the morning without parental prodding; be at home alone; walk or bike to school without an adult.
- Age 14 to 17: Schedule and go to a doctor’s appointment without help; get an after-school or summer job; make and follow a budget; take an out-of-town trip alone.

Sources: Rebecca Rialon Berry, Anne Marie Albano, American Academy of Pediatrics, familyeducation.com

Even when children are thrilled to gain some independence, parents often have to learn to cope with their own anxiety. Heidi Thompson, lives with her husband and two children in Calais, Vt., a town where children often run around unsupervised. Still, Ms. Thompson, a psychotherapist, was nervous when her daughter wanted to participate in a ritual for neighborhood kids the summer before seventh grade: camping overnight without adults on an island in the nearby lake. Ms. Thompson reluctantly gave her OK. “I was up all night,” she said. In the morning, however, her daughter, “came home so excited. We want them to feel that the world overall is a safe place,” says Ms. Thompson.

Of course, when children try something on their own, it doesn’t always go smoothly. They may take the wrong bus or choose not to study for a test—and then bomb it.

Such outcomes point to the one autonomy milestone that parents find particularly difficult, says Joseph F. Hagan Jr., clinical professor in pediatrics at the University of Vermont and the co-editor of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Bright Futures guidelines for health

professionals. “Part of independence is to make your own decisions,” he says—including “the right to make a wrong decision.”

Ms. Petersen is the author of “On Edge: A Journey Through Anxiety.”