



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Giving kids freedom can reduce their anxiety

By Jane Sutter

It's no secret that too many kids are feeling anxious these days but there's a possible solution that doesn't involve medication or counseling or parents staying close by them.

The answer is giving kids more independence, say leaders of a non-profit called Let Grow. That's right, they believe that in this era of fears of child kidnapping and stranger-danger, kids need more time for free play, riding their bikes or walking to the store or playground all on their own, without an adult supervising. The result is kids feeling more trusted, responsible and capable, and less afraid of the world, says Lenore Skenazy, the president and co-founder of Let Grow.

You may have heard of Skenazy. Back in 2008, she wrote a newspaper column about how she let her then nine-year-old son ride the New York subway alone.

What?!! She didn't get arrested or have her child taken away from her. Much to her surprise, the column caused a real stir, and suddenly she was being interviewed by reporters for national TV and radio shows and newspapers. Soon Skenazy wrote a book called *Free-range Kids*, and she began advocating for parents to understand that much of their overprotectiveness is unnecessary and potentially harmful.

There's also science to back that up. Three prominent researchers, including Peter Gray (a co-founder of Let Grow) published an article in the *Journal of Pediatrics* in 2023 stating that their findings suggest that the decline in mental health among kids and teens is directly related to the decline in the opportunities they get to do things independently of adult supervision.

Another article focused on research that shows that "short bursts of independence have led to reduced anxiety in kids and their parents, increased self-esteem and willingness to try difficult things ..." In the article published online by the *Profectus Magazine* (part of the non-partisan thinktank Archbridge



Institute), clinical psychologist Camilo Artiz, who treats kids with anxiety, states that "when parents hover and prevent children from independently exploring the world around them, they foster many of the processes that scientists have identified as causes of anxiety." Kids who don't practice independence (yes, it is a skill that withers without practice) are less self-confident, have worse social skills, are less tolerant of uncertainty, have word problem-solving skills and are less resilient. They overestimate danger, underestimate their own ability to handle problems, and catastrophize when things don't go as expected. Kids need lots of practice with what I call the four Ds: discomfort, distress, disappointment and (mild) danger. When parents step in to 'save' children from the four Ds, they inadvertently weaken children's ability to successfully navigate these integral parts of life. In contrast, independence is a fantastic way for kids to get this practice and without even realizing it, inculcate themselves against anxiety."

There's plenty of evidence that this lack of independence among kids exists. The Institute for Family Studies recently published

survey results that show that about 60 percent of American kids who are 17 years old are not allowed to leave their neighborhood unsupervised. The average American child spends just four to seven minutes outdoors in unstructured play — a dramatic change from children just a generation ago, according to the non-profit Children and Nature Network.

The evolution of fear

How did we get to the point where some parents are now afraid to let their children out of their sight — these same parents who remember hours of unstructured and fun play in their own childhoods? Skenazy's theory can be summarized this way: two child kidnappings that got national attention in 1980s, along with the increase in graphic TV crime shows and 24-hour cable news stations looking for attention-grabbing stories, plus the addition of photos of missing kids on milk cartons — never mind that the vast majority of those kids were taken in custodial disputes or were runaways — all those factors painted the world as a very scary place for kids. So, natural-

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ly parents became overprotective.

Skenazy, Gray and other collaborators have developed a free curriculum called the Let Grow Experience that teachers use to assign independence activities as homework. Once a month, kids are told to go home and do something new on their own (with their parents' permission but not supervision) such as climb a tree, run an errand, cook a meal. They come back to their school and share with their classmates what they did. The assignment empowers parents to step back and let their kids try something new.

"What's great about it is that all the kids start talking to each other," Skenazy said and offered this scenario of two kids talking:

"What did you do?"

"I went and got my own haircut."

"Oh, I want to come with you next time."

"OK, you can."

Not only do the kids benefit, but so do the parents, Skenazy said. "And then the parents talk too and are bragging. 'My kid made supper last night. Look at this great picture on Instagram.'"

"So you've broken the fear" – the loop of fear that something might go wrong and it's the parent's fault, Skenazy said. Going through the schools removes the "I'm doing this wrong" tension that a parent might feel.

Let Grow also encourages schools to set up a "play club" either before or after school, where kids have minimal adult supervision and make up their own games. Educators report seeing less bullying, less anxiety and more confidence in students who participate. Parents can set up a similar club, perhaps in their local park.

In addition to offering the free curriculum for schools, the Let Grow website also has a Family Edition of the school experience that parents can use. It includes dozens of ideas, in various categories such as spend time with animals, explore your neighborhood, and increase your responsibility.

Faith brings peace of mind

In her conversation with Creating a Safe Environment, Skenazy brought up how excessive monitoring of kids (such as schools and camps reporting how many times a kid used

the bathroom or how much of her lunch she ate) "sort of eviscerates faith and it replaces it with certainty ... but certainty is the opposite of faith, and it's faith that gives you calm."

While these reports from a school or camp are meant to give parents peace of mind, Skenazy sees the opposite effect. "Peace of mind comes from trust and faith. Peace of mind does not come from certainty, because then you need certainty the next second and the next second and the next second. So we're not being taught, we're not being trained, to trust our kids, or our neighbors, or our teachers, or our community. We're only being trained to trust ourselves and not even our kids ... If you do have faith, it should be easier to take a step back."

Skenazy mentioned that a friend whose son died "is calm and normal and happy, and it's because she has such deep religious faith that she's like, 'Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways.' Without such faith, a person can feel a staggering weight. But if you think that there's a bigger plan that you can't know, it is a relief, and I really feel that the big picture is that we're being taught not to trust anyone or anything except ourselves, and that's evil."

License to have freedom

In 2020, Let Grow surveyed every state about its child welfare laws and published the results on its website. Let Grow found that states use a variety of names for the laws that authorize investigations and punitive action when unsupervised children are considered endangered. As of April 2026, thirteen states have passed "Reasonable Childhood Independence" laws. New York is not one of them. There is no law in New York setting an age for when children can be left home alone, based on the philosophy that children mature at different rates. To read a summary of New York's laws, go to the Let Grow website. Let Grow has a legislative toolkit and works with bi-partisan sponsors and broad coalitions of allies to see legislative protections for childhood independence enacted into law.

It's not uncommon for a well-meaning adult to question a child that they see out and about on their own, Skenazy said. To help reassure that adult, Let Grow offers a printable "Kid License" on its website that states: "I am not lost or neglected" and includes spaces for a kid's name, a parent's name and phone number.

Let Grow Website:

The Let Grow website is chock full of information for schools and parents: Let Grow - When Adults Step Back, Kids Step Up.

There are downloadable resources for parents of kids from kindergarten to 12th grade. Included on the site is the opportunity to sign up for the free "Let Grow Summer Experience" guide for kids from kindergarten through eighth grade. Parents are encouraged to discuss with their child what activities the child will do on his own or with a friend without parental help or supervision. "Maybe without you even tracking or texting them!" the guide states.

Here is just a sample of activities:

- Get kids to come out and play.*
- Nerf battle!*
- Jump rope.*
- Go fishing.*
- Watch the sun rise or set.*
- Hike a local trail.*
- Play games you make up using a ball, Frisbee, balloon or stick.*
- Pick up trash in the neighborhood.*
- Walk a mile.*
- Make yourself a snack.*
- Smoothies! Made by you!*
- Plan a backyard barbecue and cook it!*
- Water balloon fight!*
- Take a bus, train or ferry.*
- Make a scavenger hunt.*
- Flashlight tag.*

The license also states: "I follow safety rules. I know to never go off with strangers, but I can TALK to them. (I'm talking to you!) It's people like you making people like me safe, by making sure I'm fine. Thanks. See you around the neighborhood!"

Skenazy is convinced that the only way to let a kid grow is to let them "do some stumbling and fumbling and rising to the occasion without us ..." Let Grow's summer guide is designed "to make it easy for parents to trust their kids, and when they do, their kids to get say, 'I did it myself!' ... and parents are the most proud of their kids when their kids do something on their own."

Jane Sutter is a freelance writer based in Rochester.



To read Skenazy's Declaration of Childhood Independence, click here:
THE DECLARATION OF CHILDHOOD INDEPENDENCE! - Free-Range Kids

To read the article by clinical psychologist Camilo Artiz, click here:
Treating Childhood Anxiety with a Mega-Dose of Independence



Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**



Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

Withdraws from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators



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Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Tammy Sylvester,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228,
or Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6