

Freeing Parents From the Anxious, Helicopter Lifestyle

I loved *Little House on the Prairie* when I was little, but as I grew older, my favorite story from this series of novels centered not on Laura Ingalls' childhood, but on that of her husband, Almanzo.

The youngest of four children growing up in 19th century New York, Almanzo and his siblings were once left home alone while their parents went out of town. For a week. On a farm. Nothing like throwing one's children into responsibility and adulthood all at once, is there?

Hilarity ensues when the children are anything but responsible in their roles as guardians of the farm. That is, until they realize that Mother and Father will soon be home and doomsday will arrive with them. Racing to rectify their mistakes, they make a good showing, impressing their parents with their apparently excellent housekeeping and behavior.

Today Almanzo's parents would likely be imprisoned for abuse and neglect for having the audacity to thrust such responsibility upon their children and leave them to encounter life unattended for even a few hours. Yet if Almanzo's parents tried to avoid such bondage by the state, they would likely find themselves in bondage to their offspring instead, a place where many modern parents unwittingly find themselves.

This [parental bondage is discussed by Gail Cornwall](#) in a recent article for *Salon*. While parents in America's earlier days—such as the Wilders—readily gave their children long leashes because they believed doing so would prepare them for future successes, parents today no longer give their children autonomy. Those who try to do so, Cornwall notes, are often shamed and maligned for their supposedly neglectful behavior.

This attitude causes problems for children and increases anxiety for parents as well. Mothers especially, Cornwall says, are pressured to keep a constant eye on their children, hobbling them from doing anything else. Such a mentality, while intensified in recent years, is simply the culmination of something Christopher Lasch observed over 40 years ago in [*The Culture of Narcissism*](#):

By keeping parents in a state of chronic anxiety, psychiatry thus frustrates desires that advertising can then claim to satisfy. It lays the emotional foundation for the insistence of the advertising industry that the health and safety of the young, the satisfaction of their daily nutritional requirements, their emotional and intellectual development, and their ability to compete with their peers for popularity and success all depend on consumption of vitamins, band-aids, cavity-preventing toothpaste, cereals, mouthwashes, and laxatives.

Today's hovering, high-stress parenting is fostered and heightened through the materialistic urges of our culture.

Because many parents have a desire to do the best they can for their children, it's easy to see why parents would fall prey to frantically hovering over their children, thereby driving up stress levels. But if we recognize what Lasch identifies as driving such stress, perhaps we have also found the key to unlocking this prison. We should ask ourselves what our children *really* need, and stop accepting what every advertiser and expert tell us they need.

Do they need to be fed? Absolutely. But that food doesn't have to come from a Happy Meal, high-end restaurant, or even the latest organic, gluten-free, vitamin-laden substance that advertisers try to sell us on. Give children good, solid, square meals, enlist their help in preparing them, and they will survive and thrive.

Do they need to be clothed? Yes, but those clothes can be simple, obtained at thrift stores or garage sales, and handed down to younger children. Unless I miss my guess, you, like me, grew up wearing hand-me-downs and were none the worse for wear.

Do our children need to grow up to be responsible adults? Of course! Yet truly responsible adults can only result from children who were gradually given greater responsibilities and allowed to fulfill them. Unless parents loosen the reins on where they allow their children to go and what challenges they allow them to tackle, both parents and children will continue living fear-filled lives, anxious over every possibility, trapped both mentally and physically.

Lastly, do our children need to be well-educated? Yes, and it is perhaps in this question that we come to the root of the whole issue of what our children need most from us. So often we focus intensely on the mental growth of our children, fixating on the best schools and extra-curricular activities money can buy. But in doing so, we often overlook the spiritual education of our children, and it is in this area that we may be able to relieve a lot of the stress that modern parents have taken upon themselves.

Educating our children in spiritual matters does not simply consist of dropping them off at church or sending them to a religious school. The spiritual education that sticks is the kind that is embraced and practiced wholeheartedly by parents alongside their children. When this happens, not only do parents find support, which helps relieve the natural stress of parenting, they also gain the knowledge and practical steps necessary to train their children to be responsible, upright adults.

Raising children is hard work. But listening to the cacophony of voices in our culture telling us to hover over our children and procure high-end goods for them will only make that job

harder.

Instead, what if we consider what Almanzo's parents did to spur their children on to adulthood? Like many parents of that time, they raised their children with traditional values, training them to have faith in God and live their lives in accordance with Christian principles. The children still made mistakes, but they were ready and well-equipped to face the future.

Our children need that kind of training today more than ever.

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