

Why Aren't Kids Outside Anymore?

“What is a good age to let kids walk to the park and play without an adult?”

That's the simple, straightforward question someone posted this week on Raising Independent Kids, a Facebook group I run as president of a nonprofit promoting childhood independence.

The answers are all very kind and nonjudgmental. No one is screaming, “Never let your kids play outside without an adult you lazy, crazy parent!” Yet they are striking nonetheless, because the age that most people seem to agree with is 7 or 8, or even less controversially, 9 or 10.

Whereas my stay-at-home mom let me walk to school solo at age 5—and she wasn't an outlier. It was normal for kids to walk to kindergarten.

In other words, the age at which we trust our kids to do something basic (and fun) on their own has almost doubled in a generation or two.

Imagine if, in that same space of time, kids went from graduating high school at age 18 to, instead, 36. What if the average age Americans got married went from 25 to 50? We're talking a really big leap in what is now considered normal and prudent, when it comes to a basic childhood activity—going outside, unsupervised, to play.

And 9 is young, compared to the results of a study in Britain that found that while today's parents were allowed out at age 9, they don't let their own kids out till they're 11!

People generally think these higher ages came about because crime has gone up so much in the intervening years, but if you

search for a chart of crime rates from 1960 to 2020 you'll see that there were 5.1 murders per 100,000 in 1960—and 5.0 in 2019. Hmm. The rates have climbed a bit during the coronavirus pandemic, but they are nothing like the rates in the early 1990s, which consistently registered more than 9 murders per 100,000 people.

So, what has happened to childhood isn't in response to reality. After all, as crime went DOWN, fear went UP. What happened is that a new belief took hold—the belief that all children are in danger all the time, so allowing them any freedom is akin to neglect.

On the Facebook page, you can see parents struggling to stay sanguine. They let their elementary-age kids go outside if it's with a friend, or a phone or a sibling. In other words, the parent is mentally preparing for a danger that can be deflected by strength in numbers or electronic supervision. That's what I mean when I talk about a totally new norm: Even a walk to the park is seen through the lens of what could go drastically, tragically wrong, not, "Gee, that sounds nice—have fun!"

And generally, when they are allowing their kids to play outside, it's because the park is down the block, or even on the side of the apartment building. The idea of kids walking, feeling comfortable and confident roaming the neighborhood doesn't come up—but that could be because the mom posing the question asked about playing at the park.

Is there a way to reverse this ever-more anxious attitude about kids' safety?

There is—but it's a bit chicken-and-egg. The more kids that come back outside, the more it seems normal again. Not nuts. And the way to GET more kids back outside is to make this a priority. Some towns have issued declarations saying they WANT kids out and about. Some schools are sending kids home with

the assignment, "Go do something new, on your own, without your parents."

Norms change over time, but they don't have to go in the wrong direction. Share the real crime stats. Get together with friends who want to give their kids more freedom. Start sending kids outside again and soon it won't seem weird. It will seem wonderful.

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