

# Why My Local School Called Security on Me

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood—Queens, New York. I'm walking by one of the local elementary schools and slow down to watch the girls doing cartwheels at recess. Over and over, they practice—proof that in free play, kids learn frustration tolerance and focus. That's why I'm such a fan.

I stop to watch another gaggle of kids playing hopscotch like I used to do. The teacher or teacher's aide looks over at me through the chain-link fence towering above us: "Ma'am, you cannot stand there. You have to move."

"I can't stand here ... on the public sidewalk?" I ask.

"No. You're not allowed to watch the kids."

"I think I am. I'm on a public sidewalk, I'm not taking pictures and I don't even have my phone out."

"You have to leave."

"I really think I'm allowed to stay here," I say, half angry, half baffled. I AM allowed to stay on a public sidewalk, separated from the kids by a fence ... aren't I?

"If you don't leave, I'm calling security."

I shrug but decide to leave. I hate confrontations.

After walking a bit beyond the playground, I pause to think about what just happened. I take out my phone and tweet:

*Walked by my local elementary school. Stopped to watch the kids playing at recess. So much joy. Teacher told me I, on public sidewalk on other side of fence, no phone or photo taking, am not allowed to stand and watch the kids. She is*

*calling security now.*

Then, out of curiosity and also a growing ember of rage, I go back to see if security has indeed been called. The teacher (or playground worker or paraprofessional—I don't know her job title) is talking to another woman, who walks to the fence and tells me that she is security and I have to move along.

"But why? I'm not doing anything bad. I'm just watching the kids."

"That's not allowed."

"Because?"

"Because we get bad people coming by here. They expose themselves. They take pictures of the kids."

"But I'm not exposing myself or taking pictures."

"We can't let anyone watch the kids. There's just too much bad stuff out there. People expose themselves. These are someone else's children and it's our job to keep them safe!"

"How many men have exposed themselves this year?" I ask, feigning curiosity, but really hoping to make a point.

"This year? So far, none."

"Zero the whole year?" I ask.

"The school year isn't over yet." True. "It's sad, but that's just the way it is," she says.

And she's right. It's really sad and that IS just the way it is.

As I have said since I founded Free-Range Kids in 2008 and since starting Let Grow in 2017—the nonprofit dedicated to childhood independence—our society is set on overestimating

danger and underestimating kids. The same society that arrests moms for letting their kids wait briefly in the car is the society that won't let kids off the bus without a (pre-approved!) adult waiting to walk them home and is the society that won't tolerate a person watching children frolic at recess, even when separated by a fence.

Fear and catastrophizing have twisted their way into everyday life. They choke off common sense. It has become taboo to trust anything or anyone—even a lady on the sidewalk, smiling as she thinks back on her own hopscotch games long ago.

And so, I am shooed along, collateral damage in the quest to wrap every child in a bubble of perfect safety.

Now I sit at my computer, wondering: What would it take to give each and every one of them a nice, sharp pin?

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