

We Wanted the Best for Our Children, But Made a Mistake

An article about to be published in the Journal of Pediatrics is titled, "Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Wellbeing: Summary of the Evidence."

The authors are three big names in child development: Anthropologist David Lancy, psychologist David Bjorklund and Peter Gray, a professor in the Dept. of Psychology and Neuroscience at Boston College – and a co-founder with me of Let Grow.

Their piece summarizes a wide swath of evidence showing that, ironically, as we replaced more and more of children's free time and free play with adult-run activities, homework, entertainment and assistance, we *thought* we were giving them more opportunities for growth and joy.

Actually, we were draining their lives of optimism and resilience.

Reversing this trend – stat! – is key, say the authors, as "children who have more opportunities for independent activities are not only happier in the short run, because the activities engender happiness and a sense of competence, but also happier in the long run, because independent activities promote the growth of capacities for coping with life's inevitable stressors."

The piece is already drawing attention. Emily Oster, author of popular books on data-driven parenting including "Expecting Better," writes in her Substack that indeed, it is indisputable that kids are less free, and less trusted to be competent, responsible, resourceful young adults than they were in the '80s:

“You can see this even in something like ‘The Baby-Sitters Club,’” Oster writes. “The seventh graders in these books – published from 1986 to 2000 – are babysitting for young infants, including at night, making dinner, cleaning the house, and so on. The feel of the world is somewhat different than what many of us experience with our children now.”

Why are trust, responsibility and independence so crucial to kids’ mental health?

Because that’s how you get a sense of what you can handle, and of who you are in the world: A competent, growing person – not a baby or a bonsai tree.

Think about a time YOU were trusted by your parents or another adult to do something without them – come home by dinner, run an errand, walk your sister to school...

That’s a milestone we don’t SEE as a milestone, because it seems so... minor. But those are the milestones that mark the path to maturity. Take them away, and kids are stuck in baby mode, feeling helpless and needy.

And depressed and anxious.

The Journal of Pediatrics article talks about how important it is to have an “internal locus of control” – a sense that you can make things happen, and deal with problems that arise. An “external locus of control” – as I think you can guess – is the feeling that someone or something else is in the driver’s seat. (And you’re in a five-point harness.)

Our culture swapped out childhood freedom and responsibility for safety and supervision. We thought we were eliminating risk and making them happy.

We went too far.

The article concludes that “concern for children’s safety and the value of adult guidance needs to be tempered by

recognition that children need ever-increasing opportunity to manage their own activities.”

How?

Well, parents can reassess whether perhaps they are being almost “too helpful” when their kids are ready to do more themselves.

Pediatricians can explain to parents that a risk-free life carries huge risks of its own.

And schools can create more independence by assigning kids The Let Grow Project (kids get the homework: “Go home and do something new, on your own”) and starting Let Grow Play Clubs, so kids get free, unstructured, no-devices play time back in their lives. (All our implementation materials are free.)

The message through all of this – including, now, a peer-reviewed journal article – is simple: When adults step back, kids step up.

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