

Kids Don't Have To Be This Anxious

What if one of the big reasons kids are so anxious is simply this: They're micromanaged by adults?

As you may have heard me say over and over (I'm getting to that age!), kids are micromanaged. Increasingly they're in adult-run classes, clubs and sports. Or they're inside on a screen, instead of climbing a tree or getting lost or talking to some lady on the bus.

While there could be many reasons our kids are suffering, what if the problem was simply this: Kids are growing up so over-protected that they're scared of the world? If so, the solution would be simple, too: Start letting them do more things on their own.

That's what Long Island University Psychology professor Camilo Ortiz and I suggested in a big piece in The New York Times this week titled, "This Simple Fix Could Help Anxious Kids."

We talk about how schools can make it easy for kids to start becoming more independent by assigning The Let Grow Project – now expanded into a year-long Let Grow Experience. (All our materials are free.)

The Project/Experience tells K-8 students to, "Go home and do something new, on your own – with your parents' permission, of course." Kids can walk to school, bake a cake, go to the store – just something that they'd like to try but haven't yet.

When the parents let go, the kids come back changed. Really! That, in turn, changes their parents. As we wrote in The Times:

Teachers and parents have told us that kids' confidence

starts climbing when they participate. For instance, a 7th grade boy pushed himself to go on a ride at Disneyland – something he'd been too scared to do before. After braving the child-friendly Slinky Dog Dash there was no stopping him – he went on ride after ride.

There was another 7th grader who'd been afraid to try out for the swim team. But her teacher made each student do 20 – count 'em! – projects on their own. So, after starting to walk herself to church and run errands for her mom, the girl got up the guts to go to swim team try outs.

And yes, she made the team. But really, it would have been just as good if she didn't. The point was to step (dive?) out of her comfort zone and boy, did she ever!

My co-author, Dr. Ortiz, had heard about the Let Grow Project. He's a clinical therapist who treats a lot of kids diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Often he uses cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), which asks the patient to face their fears. He wondered if instead he could simply ask the kids to start doing new things on their own that they WANTED to do.

In other words, the treatment would be a mega-dose of independence.

For a pilot study he conducted with Ph.D. candidate Matthew Fastman, Dr. Ortiz met with five patients, age 9-14, and their parents, once a week for five weeks. (Not in a group. Each family was separate.)

He asked the kids what they'd like to try doing on their own. They had a lot of ideas! Go to the park. Sell bracelets at school. Take the commuter train. Each kid did 10-20 things over the course of five visits.

Did it work?

OMG. It worked so well – five out of five kids felt far less

anxious than they had at the start – that Dr. Ortiz wrote up a manual for other clinicians. If you're a therapist, you can get it [here](#) (free!). If you are a teacher or administrator, you can get The Let Grow Experience materials [here](#) (free!). And if you are a parent, you can take our Pledge of Independence [here](#) – for \$1 million.

Just kidding. It's free, too.

The whole idea is so simple as to be almost ridiculous: Give kids back some independence and responsibility and they feel... independent and responsible. Unfortunately, our cautious culture took those confidence-building opportunities away from kids.

Giving them back is free. The growth is real. The time is now.

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