

How Children Learn Bravery in an Age of Overprotection

Written by Peter Gray.

In the spring of 2008, Lenore Skenazy, a resident of Queens in New York City, left her 9-year-old son off at Bloomingdale's in midtown Manhattan, in the middle of a sunny Sunday, gave him a handful of quarters, \$20 for emergencies, a map, a Metrocard, and a kiss (I assume) and said he could go home himself. To do so he would have to take the subway and a bus, on a route he had taken many times before with his mom. When he got home he was pleased as punch. He had been begging for this opportunity to prove that he could get home himself by public transportation, and now he had done it. He glowed with his new sense of maturity.

Lenore, who was then a columnist for the *New York Sun*, wrote a column about it. Within hours after the column appeared some in the media had labeled her as "America's Worst Mom." In a rare show of unity, all of the women on ABC's *The View* soundly condemned her decision. The more polite of the other fourth-grade moms at the playground said, according to Lenore, things like, "Well, that's fine, and I'll let my son do that too.... when he's in college." Lenore used this incident as a trigger to write a wonderfully funny book entitled *Free Range Kids*, in which she diminishes parental fears by showing how ridiculous so many of them are.

Now, I don't mean to one-up Lenore—whom I got to know and admire at a conference where we both spoke—in the America's worst parent department, BUT.... My son, at age 13, went to London for two weeks by himself. That was back in 1982, when it was easier to be a trustful parent than in 2008 or today. He had approached his mom and me in the spring, when he was still 12, with this request. He would earn all the money for the trip himself, so we couldn't use money as an excuse to stop him. He would plan the whole trip himself—in fact, he had already planned much of it. He wanted to prove to himself that he could organize and do something this complicated without adult help. He also wanted to see certain castles and museum treasures, which he had been reading about and were prominent in the Dungeons and Dragons games he played. He had never been abroad. Neither, for that matter, had his mom or I.

We hesitated about saying yes, "not because of your age," we explained, "but because of your diabetes." He had (and still has) Type I diabetes. He had been testing his own sugar levels, giving himself insulin injections, and regulating his diet appropriately ever since his diabetes first appeared, at age 9. He was as good at all this as any adult diabetic I knew. Yet, it is dangerous for anyone with insulin-dependent diabetes to travel alone. There's always the risk of insulin-induced hypoglycemia, in which you lose judgment and even consciousness. What if that happened while he was away, in a strange place, and nobody

helped him?

To all this, he said, in essence: “I’ll always have diabetes. If you’re telling me that I can’t travel alone because of diabetes, you’re telling me that I’ll never be able to travel alone. I don’t accept that. I’m not going to let diabetes prevent me from doing what I want to do. When I’m older I’ll travel alone and you won’t be able to stop me. If it’s not age you’re concerned about, then what’s the difference between my traveling now and my traveling when I’m 18, or 30, or 50?” His logic, as always, was impeccable.

We said, “OK.” We fulfilled our parental obligation to nag only by making him promise to wear his medic alert medallion everywhere, so if he did have an insulin reaction people could read it and see that he was diabetic and needed help and would not assume that he was drunk.

He spent the rest of that spring and all summer working and earning all the money he needed for the trip. He earned most of it through a job at a small restaurant, which he got on his own. At first he washed dishes, but then, when they saw what a good worker he was, they promoted him to working the grill and coordinating the kitchen. That itself was a wonderful growth experience. By October, he was ready to take his adventure. He was by then 13 years old. He was a student at Sudbury Valley School, with its broad view of education (which I’ve written about here), so taking time off from school was no problem. Everyone at the school understood that this trip was a valuable educational experience, so they marked him as in attendance but on a field trip.

He was abroad and out of touch with us for two weeks, saw countless castles, toured Westminster, spent days immersed in the treasures of the National Gallery and other museums, and took walking tours all over London. He also took a side trip to Oxford for a Moody Blues concert, another to Cardiff to walk the hills and see Cardiff Castle, and another to Paris with a 15-year-old young lady he had met on the plane to London. All in all, an amazing set of experiences that led him to new heights in confidence about his ability to run his own life. Diabetes diascmetes.

Now, I’ll be the first to admit that my son was not just any 13-year-old kid when he took this adventure. Had he been less responsible and less able to think things through, his mother and I might have said no. To be a trustful parent is *not* to be a negligent parent. You have to know your kid. But responsibility does not grow in a vacuum. If you want responsible kids, you have to allow them the freedom to be responsible, and that, sadly, is much harder to do today than it was in 1982; and in 1982 it was harder than in years before that.

Today it would be almost impossible for parents to let their kid have an adventure like the one that my son had at 13, no matter how responsible the kid might be. For starters, that

job of working the grill at a restaurant, where he earned the money for the trip, is now illegal for anyone under 16 years old (in our home state of Massachusetts). The state itself has decided that kids under 16, just by virtue of their age, are incompetent and irresponsible. And, on the matter of social pressure, even in 1982 our decision raised a few eyebrows. Imagine how your friends and relatives would react if you, as a parent today, made such a decision.

But, at other times and places people might have wondered more about our hesitation than about our final decision. As Lenore says in the introduction to her book, “[Our great, great grandparents] sent *their* sweet children out on slow, rusty steamers to the New World with only a couple of rubles and a hard salami.”[1]

To illustrate the enormous contrast between our own babying of children and the view of people in traditional cultures, here’s a quotation from the writing of researcher Mary Martini, about her observations of little children on the Marquesan island of ‘Ua Pou, in the South Pacific:

“Thirteen members of a stable play group were observed daily for four months and less systematically for another two. . . . Children ranged from two to five years old. They played several hours a day without supervision while their siblings attended school nearby. They organized activities, settled disputes, avoided danger, dealt with injuries, distributed goods, and negotiated contact with passing others—without adult intervention. They avoided adults, probably because adults disrupted their play. The play area was potentially dangerous. A strong surf broke on the boat ramp. The large rocks on the shore were strewn with broken glass. The valley walls were steep and slippery. Children played on a high bridge and high, sharp, lava rock walls. Machetes, axes, and matches were occasionally left around and young children played with these. In spite of these dangers, accidents were rare and minor. Hitting, teasing, and scolding were frequent, but fistfights, tantrums, and prolonged crying were rare. Disputes were frequent but were dissipated after a few minutes. Children did not seek adults or older children to settle conflicts or direct their play.”[2]

Martini goes on to explain that, in these play groups, the 4- and 5-year-olds cared for the 2- and 3-year-olds, and they did so almost entirely in the context of their play. She found that 24% of their time was involved in sociodramatic (shared fantasy) play, generally at themes relevant to the adult culture, such as “ship,” “fishing,” “hunting,” and “preparing for feasts.” Another 30% was spent at object play (building things), and 28% was spent at physical play (chasing games, climbing, and so on). All this without any adult supervision.

When Martini asked parents about their children’s playing with matches and machetes, she found that they would take those things away when they knew about it, because they were afraid that the children would waste the matches and ruin the machetes, not because they

were afraid that the children would hurt themselves. According to Martini, the children on this island were remarkably well adjusted psychologically and socially. They didn't whine or demand adult attention as Western children so often do, and they were extraordinarily adept at solving their own problems as they arose.

I doubt if there has ever been any human culture, anywhere, at any time, that underestimates children's abilities more than we North Americans do today. Our underestimation becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, because, by depriving children of freedom, we deprive them of the opportunities they need to learn how to take control of their own behavior and emotions.

Nothing in life is without risk. When we deprive our children of taking the risks that they must take to grow in competence, confidence, and courage, we run the greater and ultimately more tragic risk that they will never learn to take charge of their own lives (see post on rise of anxiety and depression).

So, be brave and let your kids be brave.

Notes:

[1] Lenore Skenazy (2009), *Free-range kids: Giving our children the freedom we had without going nuts with worry*. Jossy-Bass.

[2] Mary Martini (1994). Peer interactions in Polynesia: A view from the Marquesas. In J. L. Roopnarine, J. E. Johnson, & F. H. Hooper (Eds.), *Children's play in diverse cultures* (pp. 73-103). State University of New York Press.