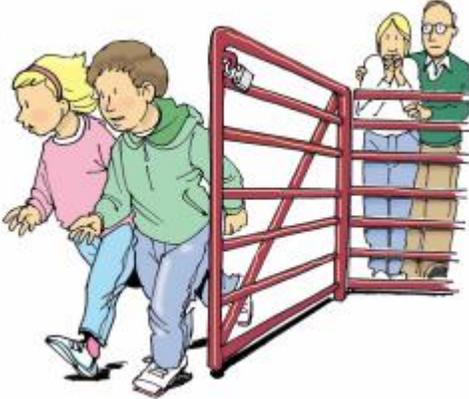


Letting our kids run free

Dennis Coday | Nov. 27, 2009



(Pat Marrin)

If you read this book (and if you have kids age 12 and under you'll probably want to) I recommend you read it as I did: in line at parent-teacher conferences, on the bench outside piano practice and in the bleachers during swim practice.

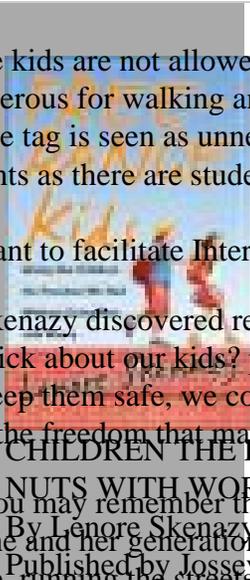
I found the people around me in these venues ready and eager to discuss the topics Lenore Skenazy explores in *Free-Range Kids*. Sitting with other parents in these settings, stories just pour out:

- The school with no bicycle racks because kids are not allowed to cycle or walk to or from school because the suburban streets are deemed too dangerous for walking and biking;
- Tag prohibited at school recesses, because tag is seen as unnecessarily rough and leads to injuries;
- Field trips that need nearly as many parents as there are students to meet the proper male-female and adult-child ratio;
- The local school district gets a \$5,000 grant to facilitate International Walk to School Day.

These stories match perfectly with examples Skenazy discovered researching and writing this book. These stories reveal that we parents worry ourselves sick about our kids' physical, mental and social safety, and in often -- dare I say it -- misguided attempts to keep them safe, we construct elaborate systems, often backed up by laws, that sap our children and ourselves of the freedom that makes them kids and keeps us sane.

You may not recognize Skenazy's name, but you may remember the incident that turned her into an activist for giving kids the kind of freedom that she says she and her generation had growing up in the 1960s and '70s. You know, crazy things like walking to school alone, running the streets of their neighborhoods without adult supervision, without cell phone tethers and with only one instruction: Get home by dark.

Did we really live that way? So recklessly?



In 2008, Skenazy's then 9-year-old son begged her to ride the New York subway from their home to a department store and back. After much pleading, she relented. He made the trip without incident (except for a boost in self-confidence and a feeling of independence). No one would have known any of this except Skenazy wrote about it in her column for the New York *Sun*. Within hours of the paper hitting the street, Skenazy was booked for interviews on "Good Morning America," FOX News, MSNBC, and other television and radio programs.

Viewers and listeners called in, many enraged that she had so endangered her child. She was dubbed "the worst mother in America."

And that's how a movement (and this being the 21st century, a corresponding [Web site and blog](#) [1]) was born. Skenazy founded -- well not exactly founded, it was thrust upon her really -- the Free-Range Kids movement. Over the next year, Skenazy defined and refined the 14 Free-Range Commandments. The first half of the book spells out those commandments -- things like know the difference between a play date and an axe murderer, it's OK to talk to strangers, let your kids eat Halloween candy from the neighbors. The second half of the book explodes myths about raising children that we have come to accept as gospel truths. She does this with wit and humor that had me chuckling and groaning out loud.

Two quick examples. Commandment No. 4 is "Boycott baby kneepads." According to Skenazy, the "kiddie safety-industrial complex" sells parents \$1.7 billion a year of goods and they are sold with the same pitch used by the arms dealers of that other industrial complex. It's all based on fear. Unfounded fear. Skenazy writes about a segment on the CBS "Early Show" that featured a "professional babyproofer" touring a typical Manhattan apartment, pointing out the dangerous stairs, doors, end tables and major appliances. The tour reaches:

"Bathroom!" he says. "Extremely dangerous." He's speaking in staccato now, like a Marine.

"Toilet lid locks have to be on every toilet in the house."

"Why?" asks the host.

"Why?" the babyproofer replies. "On average two children a week die in toilets."

Two a week? What a horrible way to go.

Most of us would have shuddered and gone out to buy toilet locks. Skenazy, as she does countless times with many other such claims, checked it out. Under home drownings on the Web site of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, she finds the official skinny on toilet drownings: "The typical scenario involves a child under 3 years old falling head first into the toilet. "[The agency] has received reports of 16 children under age 5 who drowned in toilets between 1996 and 1999."

Any drowning is a terrible tragedy and little children should be supervised in the bathroom (for a variety of reasons), Skenazy acknowledges. "But the babyproofer's stats were off by 2,600 percent! The fear that he sowed in millions of viewers will now make them more certain than ever that their children are living in incredible danger. Which works very nicely if you happen to be in the biz of selling kid safety products to parents."

Skenazy's advice to babyproof a bathroom? Keep the door closed.

Second example: How many kids have died from eating poisoned Halloween candy? This was a hot discussion in my circles, because I was reading the book the last week of October as I pulled notes from my third-grader's backpack reminding us that only "store-bought refreshments still sealed in their original packaging" could be sent to school for the annual Fall Party and Costume Day.

So how many kids have we lost to Halloween candy? Skenazy found a criminologist who researched just that topic. Searching criminal records all the way back to 1958, he could not find a single trick-or-treat casualty. Not one.

Oh yeah, and that Fall Party and Costume Day. What is that about? We used to call it the Halloween Party, but we can't anymore because Christians don't want to celebrate satanic-inspired rites with witches and the undead. And no bloody, gory, 'too' scary masks or costumes -- we don't want to frighten the children!

Why do we do this to our kids? According to Skenazy, less than 30 percent of grade-school-age children play outside. Oh sure, we enroll them -- enroll, now there's a fun-inspiring word -- in soccer, football, tennis, swim, baseball, gymnastics, tumble tots, dance and cheer teams with certified safe adult coaches, trained to keep them in shape, in line, and insulated. Why do we suck the life and fun out of their childhoods?

Skenazy spends a good amount of time in the book exploring how our mass media culture with 24-hour tabloid news feeds our parental fears about child safety, and her advice to turn off the TV news is probably wise. (Though I would suggest you keep reading newspapers.)

Skenazy doesn't get into the deeper question of why parents schedule our children with activities 16 hours a day and then follow behind them every step of the way, shuttling them from school to band practice to baseball then the math tutor and home for reading time, and then tuck them into bed.

What childhood need do we think we are meeting?

My kids are on a swim team and that is a substantial time commitment. But I've seen parents haul kids wearing baseball uniforms into swim practice, then pull them out of the water, dress them in Scout uniforms and rush them off to that gathering.

What parental need do we think we are meeting?

Those last two questions are beyond the scope of Skenazy's book, but she does point to several references useful to explore these issues, books like Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*, which was popular a couple years ago, Hara Estroff Marano's *A Nation of Wimps*, and *Pressured Parents, Stressed Out Kids* by Wendy Grolnick and Kathy Seal.

Boiled down, what's the message, the kernel of truth to take away from *Free-Range Kids*? Step back and get out of your kids' way. They'll be all right. They might, in fact, turn out better.

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