

Quitting Coddle Culture



CONTRARY to popular belief, the problem with today's child-rearing culture is not that "everyone gets a trophy." It's that there's always an adult there to *give* the kid a trophy. And to organize kids' games. And decide whether the ball was in or out. And do pretty much everything kids used to do on their own.

Childhood has become an adult-run activity. No wonder some young people expect colleges to cancel speakers who upset them. From crib to campus, they have been overseen by well-meaning adults working hard to make sure they never feel hurt or uncomfortable.

This happened over the past generation or two, as parents were told over and over that kids couldn't do anything safely or successfully on their own. Fear, frustration, test-taking, bus-riding, sleepovers, spats with friends, even (seriously) adjusting to daylight savings time — every aspect of childhood came to be seen through

the lens of how it could hurt a child physically, intellectually, or emotionally. One *Parents* magazine story told parents to keep their kids far from...*the laundry hamper*. Stand too close and it could slice a kid's cornea!

Bombarded by endless warnings, caring adults came to attend and intervene like never before, leaving kids with ever fewer opportunities to solve problems on their own, take minor risks, and grow resilient.

We're now seeing clearly what smoothing every step of the way creates: a cultural tsunami threatening to overwhelm efforts to preserve freedom and civil society. Microaggressions, trigger warnings, and cancel culture all have their origins in childhood, not freshman orientation. They're the result of raising kids to think that every one of life's challenges is just too much for them to bear.

What does college look like when students haven't learned to deal with any distress? Maybe one where the kids go to the provost to report each perceived slight.

What does the workplace look like when young people have been trained to outsource all problems? Maybe one where HR departments are overrun with demands for accommodation and anonymous complaints about co-workers.

What does democracy look like when young people grow up expecting someone else to direct them and protect them from discomfort? Maybe one that is continuously seeking solutions from government authorities.

It looks, in short, like a country that's losing its way.

That's the conclusion that Heterodox Academy's Jonathan Haidt and Daniel Shuchman, at the time the chairman of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), came to as they mulled the campus climate five years ago. Their organizations' excellent efforts, they realized, were late-stage interventions. Was there a way to stop young American minds from becoming coddled in the first place? A way to raise more flexible, open-minded kids?

They looked around for people fighting to give children more

chances to think and do things on their own—even (gasp!) to fail. They found me, the author of *Free-Range Kids* and founder of the movement by that same name that says our kids are *not* in constant danger. And they found Peter Gray, an acclaimed research psychologist who studies the importance of play. We joined forces to help get our children and country back on track by founding Let Grow, a nonprofit working to return independence and adventure to kids’ lives so they can grow into capable, confident, and happy adults. Our efforts, and those of many other like-minded parents, teachers, and school administrators, are a vital intervention in the battle against cancel culture in America.



How did we get to this point? When did the kind of childhood most of us had—a stay-out-till-the-streetlights-come-on childhood—evaporate?

Social scientists agree that it was sometime in the 1980s that America became convinced that “stranger danger” abounded and that no child was safe unsupervised. This came on the heels of two shocking child kidnappings: Etan Patz from his bus stop in 1979, and Adam Walsh from a Sears in Florida in 1981. Both boys were six.

Their stories were not just heart-wrenching and horrifying; they also generated enormous interest, in part because they coincided with the dawn of cable TV and the 24-hour news cycle. TV executives noted the public’s fascination with such tragedies and quickly catered to it. Pretty soon, missing kids’ pictures were even on milk cartons, without anyone explaining that the vast majority of children who go missing are runaways or taken in divorce custody disputes.

With “stranger danger” and fear of extreme incidents ascendant, American childhood flipped. For most of the 20th century, experts had been admonishing parents *not* to hover. In her book *Adult Supervision Required*, Markella Rutherford quotes a 1956 *Parents* magazine article advising moms to let their five-year-olds walk to

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kindergarten alone, and a 1966 *Good Housekeeping* article saying six-year-olds should be expected to call home if they’re going to be late—first, of course, having to find a phone booth. But by the 1990s, parenting practices had shifted so profoundly that ever leaving kids alone had become taboo. This adult takeover of childhood meant that age-old opportunities for kids to face their fears and solve their problems on their own dried up.

One tiny example: My friend’s sister-in-law and niece were visiting for brunch. The girl, 14, picked up a bagel and was about to slice it when she asked, “Wait. Mom, can I cut this?” To which the mother replied, “I’d rather you didn’t” and proceeded to cut it herself.

One bagel does not a generation destroy. But when it becomes the definition of “good” parenting to treat kids as helpless and fragile, a new normal is born. And the longer it goes unchecked, the more the culture forgets what kids are actually capable of.

I have met a mom who was investigated for child neglect because she let her eight-year-old walk the dog. I’ve met suburban 12-year-olds who have never walked beyond their own block, and heard from 15-year-olds still not allowed to wait alone at the bus stop. The American Academy of Pediatricians seemed to pull an age recommendation out of thin air when it officially announced in 2009 that no one younger than 10 should cross the street without an adult.

If you are over 35 or live in any country that isn’t the USA, you know that it is quite normal for kids to cross the street alone at ages

much younger than that. Yes, we have crime, cars, and creeps. And yes, a global pandemic has just dialed many parents' anxiety up to 11. But to be a parent has always been to worry. (And to be a Jewish mom like me? Oy!) The problem is that lately, many parents have come to believe that they must wait until there is *zero risk* in the world before they can allow their kids to do anything on their own.

Since we can never live in a universe free of risk, these parents are waiting for a time that will never arrive. In the meantime, they're replacing childhood autonomy, agency, and adventure with an ever-deepening sense of fragility, dependence, and anxiety.



As adults step in to oversee ever more of kids' lives, children are losing an essential and profound element that they need for maturation: play. The kind of playing you probably remember, when kids ran around inventing games, arguing, laughing.

Peter Gray likes to say that when adults and kids are together, the adults are the adults, and the kids are kids. But when there are no adults around, the kids *become the adults*. They're the ones who have to figure out how to make the bike ramp or explain Monopoly to a bunch of seven-year-olds.

As adults became ever-present in kids' lives, that kind of free play was replaced by organized activities, or by coming home and hopping on electronics. For rich kids and poor, these shifts meant that afternoons were no longer a vast swath of free time to come up with things to do. They became a lot more like school, with an adult teaching a skill or sport, or with children sitting in front of a screen.

Kids playing travel baseball might look pretty similar to kids playing a sandlot game, but the ones playing on their own are doing a whole lot more. They have to figure out who plays which position, whether someone's cheating, and what to do about Zach's little brother, who keeps running onto the field. What looks deceptively simple—literally, child's play!—is actually full of lessons

about compromise, communication, collaboration—even adjudication. And if the kids are bored, they can say, "Let's change the rules!"—necessitating new ideas and buy-in from the group, skills key to entrepreneurship and leadership. All of this is quite useful for being a citizen living in a democracy, too.

"Nothing we do, no amount of toys we buy or 'quality time' or special training we give our children, can compensate for the freedom we take away," Gray writes in his book *Free to Learn*. "The things that children learn through their own initiatives, in free play, cannot be taught in other ways."

Play has always been the way that kids have learned to solve their differences and get along. So you can see what might happen if kids barely have a chance to do this anymore because an adult is always intervening. You can see how kids might come to expect someone in authority to swoop in to fix things and make them feel better. And if that sounds suspiciously like cancel culture—demanding someone step in to make a problem just go away—you can also see how a lack of free play can lead to a lack of free speech and free thought.

It can also lead to an erosion of mental health. As Jonathan Haidt likes to explain, some things are fragile: Drop a wine glass, it breaks. Some things are resilient: Drop a ball, it bounces back, good as new. But some things are, to use Nassim Nicholas Taleb's phrase, *anti-fragile*: They get stronger when they encounter stress. The immune system needs to encounter germs. Bones and muscles need to encounter resistance. And kids?

Kids are built to encounter the world, not shrink from it. To grow strong and learn to rebound, they need to experience some fear, confusion, setbacks, and frustration. Constant adult assistance—overprotection—turns kids into Bonsai trees. Trimming their roots, their very foundations, stops them from growing to their full glory. When we eliminate opportunities for kids to play on their own, when adults are in charge of every activity, kids don't get the practice they desperately need to become well-adjusted humans in a diverse civil society. Anxiety rates are soaring at least in part because children are

not learning the skills to actually deal with life's inevitable challenges, including ideas and behaviors that they don't like.



Nu?

We need to return to raising robust and resilient children. I don't blame today's parents for where we are—helicoptering is practically demanded of them. But if hovering and helping are how we got here, how do we find our way back? We start to undo the social, cultural, and even legal interventions that have become our way of life over the past generation or two.

We need to consciously start taking care not to help kids when they can help themselves. We need to *not* assume that all downturns are disasters for them. We need to recognize the great value of unsupervised playtime and lavish it on kids as if it's tutoring. We need to let children flail and fail a little more, to develop some emotional calluses.

And then, as they get older, if there's a book, idea, or speaker that they find unsettling, we need to encourage them to grapple with the content—and their own reaction to it. We need to tell young people that we expect them to engage, to debate, to push through.

That means the adults in charge have to stop enabling—even ennobling—fragility. University presidents should be championing free speech and canceling cancellations. Editors and publishers and CEOs should do the same.

Shielding needs to be seen for what it is: stunting. Harm comes not from listening to ideas that challenge our kids'—or our own—worldview, but from failing to build the psychological and intellectual curiosity and agility that citizens in a diverse democracy desperately need.

Our assertion at Let Grow is that as we trust kids with some old-fashioned freedom, responsibility, and exposure to everyday life without a minder, their spiking anxiety levels will go down. Their

tolerance for risk and discomfort will go up. Parents' confidence in their children will increase, too, because they'll see them doing all sorts of new things—even slicing their own bagels.

We've started to develop some resources that can be helpful to parents, kids, and schools. We offer schools a homework assignment, The Let Grow Project, that tells students to “go home and do something new on your own,” gently pushing parents to step back and watch their kids finally walk to the park or run an errand. Our Play Club program encourages schools to stay open for mixed-age, device-free, before-or-after-school free play. An adult is on premises, but they don't organize the games or solve the spats, so the kids learn how to do this themselves. Our “Think for Yourself” essay contest asks high schoolers to write about a time they changed their minds, stood up for an unpopular idea, or learned something from someone they disagreed with. More than 5,000 students enter every year, vying for scholarship money and a chance to attract the attention of major media publishers. And we are re-normalizing and even re-legalizing childhood freedom by working to redefine childhood neglect as putting your kids in serious danger—not simply taking your eyes off them. Thus we are enshrining “reasonable childhood independence” into law. Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado have all passed such laws with bipartisan, and often unanimous, support. We expect many more states to follow.

By allowing kids to experience, at last, the thrill that comes with overcoming rather than avoiding obstacles, they start to realize their resilience. Vaccinated against the fear of failure, they don't demand excessive protection. Conditioned by play to make things happen and try out new ideas, they don't passively await micromanagement. And encouraged to think for themselves, they engage. Our colleges, companies, and country all reap the rewards.

The kids themselves? They discover they don't need another trophy, because now they've got something better: a chance to spread their wings and fly. *