



Know When to Worry

*Play Dates and Axe Murderers:
How to Tell the Difference*

It was one of those chaotic parenting moments. The ones when you have to make a decision—fast.

Isabelle, the twelve-year-old daughter of my friends Jeff and Sue, had just been in the middle school play. She was going with the cast to the local Friendly's for ice cream, along with several dozen kids and parents. Clearly this was the suburban equivalent of the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party, which is why Isabelle's little sister, ten-year-old Kaitlin, begged to go along too.

My friends said yes, even though they'd promised to look after Kaitlin's friend, another ten-year-old. Let's call her Baby M.

Sue had to peel off, so Jeff dropped all three girls off at Friendly's, gave them money for ice cream, and told them he'd come back to pick them up in half an hour.

So now, instead of going straight to Kaitlin's house as planned, Baby M was at an ice cream shop with her friend and another fifty or sixty riotously happy schoolchildren she knew. Being a responsible girl, she called her mom to tell her where she was.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?" screamed Baby M's mom. "You're WHERE? By YOURSELF?" She slammed down the phone and called Sue to yell, "How dare you do this to my child!"

Now look, I'm a mom too, and when plans change, I'd like to get a call. But there's a difference between being mildly annoyed and hair-standing-straight-up hysterical. The crazed mom barely had time to hang up the phone before she ran out to her car and sped over to Friendly's. She scooped up her kid—yes, leaving little Kaitlin by herself—but not before declaring to the world (or at least to a whole lot of ice cream eaters): “This is NOT how I'm raising my daughter!”

No indeed! She's raising her to be a hothouse, mama-tied, danger-hallucinating joy extinguisher—just like she is. (Which, by the way, is why I've changed everyone's name in this story. I don't want to make a crazed mom crazier.)

Days went by, and this mom refused to answer any of my friends' apologetic e-mails. Why would she? To her mind, Sue and Jeff had done the moral equivalent of dragging her daughter into a forest filled with wolves, snakes, and unshaven guys lurching around with a jug of moonshine in one hand and a pickax in the other.

Baby M's mom thinks her daughter is just very lucky that nothing bad happened to her that scary, scary night. She also thinks that, as a mom, she was doing the only rational, caring thing: making sure her ten-year-old was supervised every second, every place, every day by a preapproved adult.

How *dare* anyone subject her daughter to that unscheduled ice cream shop experience? Mama didn't approve of it beforehand, she was not consulted, she didn't check the menu for appropriate foods, she didn't know who the girl might talk to—and it's quite possible that while there, her daughter might have had to go to the bathroom. God knows what would have happened to her there! (Cue the unshaven lurchers.)

Anyway, my point—and maybe I'm starting to sound as wild-eyed as that mom—is this: a lot of parents today are really bad at assessing risk. They see no difference between letting their children walk to school and letting them walk through a firing range. When they picture their kids riding their bikes to a birthday party,

they see them dodging Mack trucks with brake problems. To let their children play unsupervised in a park at age eight or ten or even thirteen seems about as responsible as throwing them in the shark tank at Sea World with their pockets full of meatballs.

Any risk is seen as too much risk. A crazy, not-to-be-taken, see-you-on-the-local-news risk. And the only thing these parents don't seem to realize is that the greatest risk of all just might be trying to raise a child who never encounters *any* risks.

Not that I'm a fan of taking crazy risks. I hate them! They make no sense. Riding a bike without a helmet strikes me as about as sensible as riding a roller coaster rated MP for "Missing Planks." My love for seatbelts borders on the obsessive. And car seats? One of those saved my life when I was two and our car somersaulted off the highway. That was before car seats were even required, so I come from solid, safety-loving stock. Safety is *good*. But if we try to prevent every possible danger or difficulty in our child's everyday life, that child never gets a chance to grow up.

Or eat ice cream without a chaperone.

Now, if "The Incident at Friendly's" were unusual, this book would end right here. It would be about one overworried mom, and who cares about that?

But unfortunately, Mama M is not alone in her fears. Millions of moms and almost (but not quite) as many dads now see the world as so fraught with danger that they can't possibly let their children explore it.

Sometimes they regret having to rein their kids in, but rein them in they do. A woman who wrote me from quiet, suburban Atlanta won't let her daughter go to the mailbox by herself. That's right. The *mailbox*. In her mind, there's just "too much that could happen" between the door and the curb.

Another dad informed his daughter that he was going to follow her school field trip to make sure nothing happened to her. Why? Could he stop the bus from plunging off the road?

Then there was the New Jersey radio talk show host who interviewed me after the now infamous incident of my letting Izzy ride the subway by himself. How could I do such a crazy thing, the host demanded. *He* believes in safety. *He* loves his son. That's why *he* won't let the boy, age eight, play basketball in his own driveway. *Too many creeps out there!*

Yes, there are many creeps in this world of ours. Some of them even have bombastic radio shows and speak in italics. But some of them are creeps of the classic kind: pedophiles and murderers and guys who feel compelled to show kids what's under their raincoat. Creeps are a sad fact of life. The fact that many parents seem unable to process, however, is that

THERE AREN'T ANY MORE CREEPS NOW THAN WHEN WE WERE KIDS.

Hard to believe, but that's what the statistics show. Over at the Crimes Against Children Research Center, they track these things (as you might guess from their name). David Finkelhor, the founder of the center and a professor at the University of New Hampshire, says that violent crime in America has been falling since it peaked in the early nineties. That includes sex crimes against kids. He adds that although perhaps the streets were somewhat safer in the fifties, children today are statistically as safe from violent crime as we parents were, growing up in the seventies, eighties, and nineties.

So when parents say, "I'd love to let my kids have the same kind of childhood I had, but times have changed," they're not making a rational argument.

Times have *not* changed. Especially not where childhood abductions are concerned. Those crimes are so very rare that the rates do not go up or down by much in any given year. Throw in the fact that now almost everyone is carrying a cell phone and can immediately call the police if they see a kid climbing into a van filled with balloons, a clown, and automatic weapons, and times are, if anything, safer.

The problem is that we parents *feel* that childhood is more dangerous for our kids than it was for us, and over the course of this book, we'll look at where those fears come from and which ones are utterly baseless and why they're so hard to shake. But if you (like, sometimes, me) only read a chapter or two and then "forget" to read the rest of a book, or "accidentally" leave it on the bus, let me just state clearly before it's too late that we have it all wrong. Our kids are more competent than we believe, and they're a whole lot safer, too. We are extremely worried today about exceedingly unlikely disasters—or, as the experts put it, "negative outcomes." (Like death would be a "negative outcome" of gum surgery.)

Dr. F. Sessions Cole, chief medical officer at the St. Louis Children's Hospital, one of the Midwest's biggest medical centers, put it this way: "The problem is that the public assumes that any risk to any individual is 100 percent risk to them."

What he means is that if people hear about one child who died from falling out of a crib, they immediately assume that their child is at risk for that same thing. When one child gets a rare infection, they think it's likely that theirs could too. When they hear about one child abducted from a parking lot, they assume their child could well be next, even though, in reality, those chances are so slim that actual, factual statisticians have a word for them: *de minimis*. Risks so small that they are virtually equivalent to none. I'm not saying that the abducted children are equivalent to none. No! I'm saying that the risk is so small, it's almost impossible to guard against. Just like it's almost impossible to guard against the possibility of being hit by an asteroid.

And yet rattled parents, besieged by media and each other, feel they must take all possible precautions to avoid all these extremely rare possibilities. "But if you live your life that way," said Dr. Cole, "as best I can tell, you can never even go to the bathroom, because there could be something that sucks you into the toilet."

8 FREE-RANGE KIDS

But Dr. Cole isn't being flip. He's the classic white-haired, sixty-something doctor—he should have his own TV show, he's so perfect for the part of himself—and over the past twenty years he's seen more and more parents coming in distraught about more and more outlandish possibilities. Even after he has reassured these parents that their child is fine, they demand MRIs and other tests to “prove” it. Or, just to be safe, they decide to restrict their children's diets, even after he tells them he seriously doubts this will have any effect on their health.

This eagerness to restrict things is not limited to food. Think of how, thanks to fear, we restrict so many other aspects of our children's lives. They're not allowed to walk alone (cars!), explore (perverts!), or play in the park (those perverts again) or in the woods (ticks!) or in trees (gravity!) or in water (drowning!) or in dirt (dirt). It's not your imagination: childhood really has changed. Forty years ago, the majority of U.S. children walked or biked to school. Today, about 10 percent do. Meantime, 70 percent of today's moms say they played outside as kids. But only 31 percent of their kids do. The children have been sucked off America's lawns like yard trimmings.

Where did all this fear come from? Take your pick: The fact that we're all working so hard that we don't know our neighbors. The fact that the marketplace is brimming with products to keep our kids “safe” from things we never used to worry about—like shopping cart liners to protect kids from germs.

Then there's the way our brains cling to scary thoughts (girls murdered on a country road) but not mundane ones (all the girls who walk home from school without getting murdered). That's just basic psychology. Meanwhile, “helpful” articles list the dangers of every possible activity from running barefoot (fungus!) to flying kites. “Choose a sunny day when there's no chance of lightning,” one kite article actually suggested. So I guess we shouldn't choose a day when trees are flying by the window and there's a funnel-

shaped cloud coming toward the driveway? Thank you so much, oh wise magazine!

Fear, fear, fear. We're always expected to be thinking about fear. Schools hold pre-field trip assemblies explaining exactly how close the children will be to a hospital. At least, our school did. Come home and the TV tells us about "the killer under your sink!" (Turns out you shouldn't drink Drano.) And "the monster who could be your neighbor!" (but probably isn't). And "the hidden danger in your drink!" (A lemon. It has bacteria on it. Big deal. So does everything else.) Everyone is exhorting us to watch out, take care, and plan for the very worst-case scenario. Which puts a damper on things, to say the least.

A doctor wrote to the Free-Range Kids Web site:

We live in beautiful Ardsley, New York. I pay 20K in taxes a year to provide a safe environment and good education for my children. You would have thought I committed a crime when I let my 8-year-old daughter ride her bike by herself approximately two city blocks to a friend's house. My wife let it be known how vehemently she disagreed with me. In addition, all the parents in the neighborhood also thought I was crazy. Indeed, of course I would have grieved had "something" happened. But should I let that immobilize my children? I lost my mother to a drunk driver at the age of 46, and my sister to cancer at age 24. In addition, I am an emergency medicine physician who sees tragedy every day. Therefore, I know, more than most, the pain of tragedy and longshots. I could let this paralyze me, but I don't. I choose, to the best of my ability, to allow my children the same freedoms that I had as a child growing up, when I was taking the train by the 7th grade, and riding my bike by myself by the age of 9. I choose to give my children freedom.

What a cool guy, embracing life with his eyes wide open. Good luck to him, and good luck to you, dear reader, as you seem to be on the same journey. And then good luck convincing your friends and spouse to join you.

You're going to need it.

REAL WORLD

What's Wrong with Our Society?

What's Wrong with Me?

A Free-Ranger writes:

I'm a mom of a 13-year old boy and an 11-year old girl and I'm ashamed of how paranoid I am. The news keeps you in constant fear of your child being abducted and raped and eaten, etc. I was a kid who took two buses to get to my Catholic School as early as age 7. And I did it all by myself. My friends and I wandered all over the city, and as long as we were home by dark, we could do whatever we wanted. Without cell phones! Now, here I am, with a teenager, and I get an upset tummy when I watch him walk with his friends to junior high each day. What's wrong with our society? What's wrong with me? Here I am, a fearless adult who went everywhere I wanted, and I'm too paranoid to let my teenager walk to the store. I'm ashamed that I've allowed society to shape me into a worrier. Yes, there are predators. But they aren't everywhere and I need to get over myself. Fast. Before I raise a scaredy-cat son and paranoid daughter. We're gonna have a whole generation of skittish people if we don't give our kids some space, starting with mine. I'm gonna go kick them out of the house on this sunny afternoon and let them wander. (But they better answer their cell phones.)

Going Free Range



All kids are different, as are all parents (for better or worse), but if you're reading this book, chances are you are probably wondering how to start weaning yourself off of excess worry and giving your kids some old-fashioned freedom. There are no hard-and-fast timetables and, alas, no guarantees of which of these will work for you (or me!), but consider the following suggestions:

Free-Range Baby Step: Cross the street with your school-age child, without holding hands. Make 'em look around at the traffic.

Free-Range Brave Step: Let your little bikers, starting at age six or so, ride around the block a couple times, beyond where you can see them. (Yes, in their helmets.)

One Giant Leap for Free-Range Kind: Drop off your third- or fourth-grade child and a friend at an ice cream store with money for sundaes. Pick them up in half an hour. So there.