



Parents, Children and Risk: Damned if we do, Damned if we don't

To let go or not? It's a choice parents face all the time but never more starkly than each summer when school ends and we're confronted with the dilemma of what to do with the kids for the next three months.

Once upon a time summer was an opportunity for children to stretch their wings, to spend countless hours playing with friends, exploring, being bored. For older kids it might have meant a trip to summer camp – missing the family, but also making new friends, growing a little taller and returning home more confident with a swagger even. It meant sunburns, insect bites and maybe – for the truly fortunate - a broken limb with cast to be signed.

Things are very different today. In households where both parents work it's likely to mean more of the same – some variation of the usual childcare or a school summer program punctuated by a family vacation. Sleep away camp is an option for some children, but the rough and tumble nature camps of old have given way to expensive retreats in luxury cabins with running water, electricity and air conditioning. Parents have come to expect their children to return home having achieved results in some specific area – perfected their musical technique, learned a foreign language, lost weight or at the very least, have completed a series of activities designed to build self confidence, enhance interpersonal skills and increase self esteem.

But the issue is not whether or not kids go away to camp. It's that whatever our children do today, it's likely to be supervised and geared toward safety and education. The long, unstructured days of summer when we roamed the neighborhood in childish gangs, when camp was a treat and not something to be listed on a future college application, are gone. Our parental impulse is not to encourage kids to make up their own games but to organize their time and entertain them in ways we know will be fun, safe and enriching.

Unfortunately this is not best for our children. Robbed of the opportunity to grow into independence and responsibility, children never learn to manage risks or use their initiative. There have been a spate of horror stories in the press recently about parents stepping in to 'help' their college-aged children when the going gets tough, fixing things behind the scenes, haranguing college officials about grades, writing term papers, even negotiating graduate salary packages. Things which seem excessive but are really just the logical extension of the way we treat the very young.

The instinct to protect our children by keeping control of how and where and with whom they spend their time is *so* strong that most people assume it's completely natural. If our parents seemed less protective, let us go outside alone, ride bikes without helmets or participate in competitive sports, it was only because they didn't know any better. They didn't have to worry about today's concerns, such as pedophiles, or attachment theory, head injuries or the profound psychic damage inflicted upon those never called when choosing sides in basketball.

I would offer an alternative explanation: that the dangers and challenges children were likely to encounter in our parents' day are not so very different than those they might encounter now, but that society in the past placed a greater value on learning to be independent and assumed children had a high degree of resiliency. Furthermore, parents could make certain assumptions about other adults that made cutting the apron strings second nature

To understand why parents today have such a hard time letting go, we need to understand what's new about the current climate. Although there are a number of important factors to consider having to do with our expectations when it comes to our children, the two changes that most directly affect parents are the breakdown of solidarity between adults and society's growing preoccupation with the details of individual's personal lives.

Adult Solidarity Breaks Down

The breakdown of solidarity amongst adults has been written about by other people but it really can't be overstated how profoundly it has influenced our outlook. Parents in the past could let their children walk to school and roam the neighborhood because there was a consensus about how adults should relate to children and a palpable feeling of collective responsibility for the next generation. In that sense children were never truly on-their-own. As youngsters we were perpetually set upon by adults, scolded for picking flowers from other people's gardens, menacing one another with big sticks or dashing into the road. It wasn't perfect and occasionally adults did abuse their position of authority, but the vast majority did not and in any case, being around adults more often, children were arguably far more street-wise than they are now.

Today parents really *don't* know what to expect when it comes to other people. The same very adults who were once our allies in guiding our kids along the path to independence are now viewed as a potential threat. Parents in turn are mistrusted by other adults.

Hyper-focus on Personal Behavior

The other important change is the current focus on private life. Both as individuals and as a society, we tend to be more interested in personal life than broader issues or achievements. Even the most intimate details of our family lives are subject to scrutiny. To spank or not to spank, to co-sleep in the family bed or relegate the baby to a crib, to breastfeed or not - all these are matters of intense public interest, far more so than other, arguably more important, issues. Parents make decisions about their children in a climate where personal choices are charged with moral and political significance. Furthermore, society actually does judge parents on basis of their children. If our children are safe, healthy, happy and successful, we're deemed good parents. If they aren't, we take the blame. Is it any wonder that parents are highly motivated to play an active part in managing their children's lives?

What Should We Do?

So how can we change this situation?

The first thing we need to do is to stop admonishing parents. Parents and children need the space to find the balance between freedom and supervision that is right for them. And frankly I think we should ridicule attempts to make political issues of things like breastfeeding or c-sections or whether we work at a job or stay at home with the kids.

Secondly, we need to start taking collective responsibility for the fate of the next generation. This means having the courage to speak directly to children when they need to be put back in line but also to acknowledge them more generally. It means supporting other adults who relate to children instead of regarding them with suspicion. As parents it may mean coming up with creative ways to give our kids more freedom with the cooperation of friends, neighbors and other families.

Finally we need to give young people a little credit, to expect more of them. This means we need to stop indulging in dire predictions about the pathetic state of our young people. Every generation has hurdles to overcome, and it maybe that today's children will have an uphill struggle. But childhood is not destiny and with the right sort of pressure from other adults even the most feckless youngster can rise to the occasion, take charge of his own future and grow up.