



## Why are Parents So Anxious?

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Scratch a contemporary American parent and you will almost always find a deep belief that the environment around children has deteriorated over the past several decades. The facts, however, are more complex than the perceptions. And a slightly more ample historical perspective makes it even clearer that parents should be growing less anxious, not more.

Parents have become terrible estimators of risks to children. The example of child abductions is telling, but there are many others. The result can be the famous contemporary helicopter parent, eager to organize and monitor regardless of costs to self and child.

In my judgment, while parental anxiety has accelerated in the past few decades, the process goes back a bit earlier. The reason to probe origins is not some historian's fussiness, but to allow some estimation of basic causes.

It was in the 1920s that images of children's vulnerabilities and frailties began to overtake earlier emphasis on a considerable degree of sturdiness. Several examples from the area of emotions drive the point home, but there was also a growing anxiety about physical safety and parental responsibilities. These developments suggested an expansion of childrearing goals, to include emotional health, which helps explain why the whole process seemed to become more complicated even as some of the longstanding historical risks to children actually declined.

In this process, four developments were crucial, along with some new objective issues such as automobile safety.

1. The birth rate dropped to historic lows, making each individual child more precious but also by the same token more vulnerable. Massive decline in the child death rate was also part of this process, but triggered a new, and ultimately self-defeating, set of expectations about risk and fear. At the same time, the definitive termination of children's economic value – with the elimination of child labor and the precipitous decline in useful work at home – triggered complex reassessments that further fed the idea of vulnerability.
2. New disciplines began to dominate advice to parents, headed by psychology; these disciplines had genuine new knowledge but also a built in self-interest in

discrediting older approaches. The sheer expansion of advice literature suggested new relationships to parents.

3. Changes in adult jobs complicated the standards parents thought they had to inculcate in children. School success began to be truly important, and emotional goals became more complicated as well.
4. Finally, topping all this off, parents' range of control over children in many ways decreased. This could heighten anxious attention particularly to young children.

All these themes have persisted and intensified since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they help explain current anxiety levels. They have been amplified, however, particularly since the 1980s, by changes in the role and tone of media, and particularly a new willingness deliberate to stimulate fear as a means of selling goods and services.

Almost all historians of contemporary childhood, and many other experts from other disciplines, agree that we have come to underestimate the capacity of children, in regulating and monitoring them beyond reasonable or productive levels. There is no need to exaggerate damage or impugn motives: but the process does affect children and their transition to adulthood and it arguably worsens the experience of

parenting itself. It's not fanciful to connect the parenting issues to larger problems of fear in American society, with political as well as personal consequences.

Breaking the cycle, however, is a challenging proposition. Presumably it can begin with greater perspective and understanding. But it is admittedly easier to diagnose, in this area, than to remedy.