Children today have less independence. Is that fueling a mental health crisis?

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For years, Peter Gray, a research professor of psychology and neuroscience at Boston College, has been closely following two disturbing trends: the dwindling of independent activity and play afforded to children over the past half-century, and the accelerating rise in mental health disorders and suicides among youth during that same period.

There are familiar factors that surface in discussions of the youth mental health crisis in America, with screen use and social media often topping the list of concerns. But Gray suspects a deeper underlying issue: The landscape of childhood has transformed in ways that are profoundly affecting the way children develop — by limiting their ability to play independently, to roam beyond the supervision of adults, to learn from peers, and to build resilience and confidence.