

The Overprotected American Child

June 11, 2018

A few weeks ago I left my 9-year-old daughter home alone for the first time. It did not go as planned.

That's because I had no plan. My daughter was sick. My husband was out of town. And I needed to head to the drugstore—a five-minute walk away—to get some medicine for her. So I made sure my daughter knew where to find our rarely used landline phone, quizzed her on my cellphone number and instructed her not to open the front door for anyone. Then I left. Twenty minutes later I was back home. Both of us were a bit rattled by the experience—her first time completely alone, with no supervising adult!—but we were fine.

I had been postponing this moment of independence for my daughter for months, held back by worry over the potential catastrophes. But I know that this way of thinking is part of a larger social problem. Many have lamented the fact that children have less independence and autonomy today than they did a few generations ago. Fewer children are [walking to school on their own](#), riding their bicycles around neighborhoods or going on errands for their parents. There have been several high-profile cases of parents actually being charged with neglect for allowing their children to walk or play unsupervised. We're now seeing a backlash to all this pressure for parental oversight: Earlier this year, the state of Utah enacted a new “free-range” parenting law that redefined neglect to specifically exclude things like letting a child play in a park or walk to a nearby store alone.

Overzealous parenting can do real harm. Psychologists and educators see it as one factor fueling a surge in the number of children and young adults being diagnosed with anxiety disorders. According to a [study published this year](#) in the Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, the number of children aged 6 to 17 whose parents said they were currently diagnosed with anxiety grew from 3.5% in 2007 to 4.1% in 2012. And in a [2017 survey](#) of more than 31,000 college students by the American College Health Association, 21.6% reported that they had been diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems during the previous year. That is up from 10.4% in a [2008 survey](#).