

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Free range parenting

Allowing children to develop real independence is one of the biggest challenges modern parents face. Our basic job is to keep kids safe and secure, that doesn't mean we eliminate risk altogether by overprotecting them.

Would you let primary school kids catch a train on their own?

This was the indirect challenge for parents when the psychologist dubbed America's worst parent Lenore Skenazy visited Australia recently.

US parenting show host Skenazy sparked a worldwide controversy when she admitted allowing her nine-year-old son to ride the New York subway on his own.

"Bad mum" was the outcry from parenting groups everywhere.

Allowing children to develop real independence is one of the biggest challenges modern parents face. When to allow a child to walk to the park on their own, babysit younger siblings, make their own way to school, catch a train to the city and go to the cinema without adult supervision, are the sorts of dilemmas that many parents sweat over.

Most parents I meet admit to having had more freedom to roam when they were kids than they allow their own children, yet they are unwilling to allow their children those same freedoms.

Children's busy schedules, concerns over increased traffic and stranger danger are the most common reasons given for parents restricting children's freedoms to navigate their communities free from adult supervision.

Ironically, we've learned in the last two decades that kids are more likely to be harmed by someone they know than from a stranger in the street, on a train or in a park. The world is no less dangerous than it was when we were growing up, but there is a perception that it's less safe.

Independence builds confidence

There's a lot to be said for giving kids a little bit of rope. Giving children more independence is one of the most effective ways of developing confidence. It builds a broader experience base than parents can normally provide.

Greater freedom also involves an element of risk, which is naturally scary for parents. While our basic job is to keep

kids safe and secure, that doesn't mean we eliminate risk altogether by overprotecting them.

Instead we reduce risk by skilling up our kids to navigate the broader environment safely on their own. Scaffolding – children being granted small degrees of independence – is a strategy many parents use to reduce the risk for their children in public while they grant their children more freedom. Dropping young children off a few hundred metres from the school gate and allowing them to walk the rest of the way on their own is an example of scaffolding to independence.

The primary school years are the time to build the skills of independence, so that when children move into adolescence they are more able to be self-sufficient.

Adolescents usually want greater freedoms than parents are prepared to give. Expecting young people to maintain contact with you; setting time limits for being out and rewarding responsible behaviour with greater freedom are some practical ways for parents to reduce risk with this age group.

A necessary leap of faith

It's funny how most parents find it easier to grant greater freedom to later borns than their eldest children. It's easier for parents to let go of the later borns, as we've learned from experience that most kids are pretty capable when it comes to navigating their expanding world. Besides, youngest borns get plenty of hands-on lessons watching and listening to their elder siblings' exploits of navigating the big, wide world.

Regardless of where children come in the family, granting them more freedom can be a leap of faith for many parents. But it's a leap we should take earlier rather than later.

3 parenting ideas to build independence

1. Reduce risks for kids through skilling up & scaffolding.
2. Start building self-sufficiency earlier rather than later.
3. Reward responsible behaviour with greater freedom.