

ARE MODERN KIDS CODDLED?

BY [NEWSWEEK STAFF](#) ON 4/20/08 AT 8:00 PM

Would you let your fourth-grader ride public transportation without an adult? Probably not. Still, when Lenore Skenazy, a columnist for the New York Sun, wrote about letting her son take the subway alone to get back to her Manhattan home from a department store on the Upper East Side, she didn't expect to get hit with a tsunami of criticism from readers.

"Long story short: My son got home, ecstatic with independence," Skenazy wrote on April 4 in the New York Sun. "Long story longer: Half the people I've told this episode to now want to turn me in for child abuse. As if keeping kids under lock and key and helmet and cell phone and nanny and surveillance is the right way to rear kids. It's not. It's debilitating—for us and for them."

Online message boards were soon swarming with people both applauding and condemning Skenazy's decision to let her son go it alone. She wound up defending herself on the cable news networks (accompanied by her son) and on popular blogs like the Huffington Post, where her follow-up piece was ironically headlined "More From America's Worst Mom."

The episode has ignited another one of those debates that divides parents into vocal opposing camps. Are modern parents needlessly overprotective, or is the world a more complicated and dangerous place than it was when previous generations were allowed to roam unsupervised?

From the "she's an irresponsible mother" camp came: "Shame on you for being so cavalier with his safety," in comments on the Huffington Post. And there was this from a mother of four: "How would you have felt if he didn't come home?" But Skenazy got a lot of support, too, with women and men writing in with stories about how they were allowed to run errands all by themselves at seven or eight. She also got heaps of praise for bucking the "helicopter parent" trend: "Kudos to this Mom," one commenter wrote on the Huffington Post. "This is a much-needed reality check."

Last week, buoyed by all the attention, Skenazy started her own blog—Free Range Kids—promoting the idea that modern children need some of the same independence that her generation had. In the good old days nine-year-old baby boomers rode their bikes to school, walked to the store, took buses—and even subways—all by themselves. Her blog, she says, is dedicated to sane parenting. "At Free Range Kids, we believe in safe kids. We believe in helmets, car seats and safety belts. We do NOT believe that every time school-age children go outside, they need a security detail."

So why are some parents so nervous about letting their children out of their sight? Are cities and towns less safe and kids more vulnerable to crimes like child abduction and sexual abuse than they were in previous generations?

Not exactly. New York City, for instance, is safer than it's ever been; it's ranked 136th in crime among all American cities.

Nationwide, stranger abductions are extremely rare; there's a one-in-a-million chance a child will be taken by a stranger, according to the Justice Department. And 90 percent of sexual abuse cases are committed by someone the child knows. Mortality rates from all causes, including disease and accidents, for American children are lower now than they were 25 years ago. According to Child Trends, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research group, between 1980 and 2003 [death rates dropped by 44 percent](#) for children ages five to 14 and 32 percent for teens aged 15 to 19.

Then there's the whole question of whether modern parents are more watchful and nervous about safety than previous generations. Yes, some are. Part of the problem is that with wall-to-wall Internet and cable news, every missing child case gets so much airtime that it's not surprising even normal parental paranoia can be amplified. And many middle-class parents have gotten used to managing their children's time and shuttling them to various enriching activities, so the idea of letting them out on their own can seem like a risk. Back in 1972, when many of today's parents were kids, 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school walked or biked every day. But today, the Centers for Disease Control report that only 13 percent of children bike, walk or otherwise get themselves to school. (That lack of physical activity has prompted the CDC to create outreach programs designed to get kids walking to school again, in an effort to combat the childhood obesity epidemic.)

The extra supervision is both a city and a suburban phenomenon. Beth Turner, a stay-at-home mom of two in Lowry, Colo., a suburban community near Denver, lets her nine-year-old daughter Mikaleia walk to the playground, which is two and a half blocks from their house. But only when Mom and Dad are watching. And once she's there her parents check up on her periodically.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Nick Goldberg, a father of three teenage sons, says that L.A.'s nine-year-olds do not generally have much freedom. "Parents are worried about crime, and they're worried about kids getting caught in traffic in a city that's not used to pedestrians," he says.

On the other hand, the trend toward more supervision isn't **ubiquitous**. There are still plenty of latch-key kids whose parents give them a lot of independence, by choice or by necessity. The After School Alliance finds that more than 14 million kids ages five to 17 are responsible for taking care of themselves after school. Only 6.5 million kids participate in organized programs. "Many children who have working parents have to take the subway or bus to get to school. Many do this by themselves because they have no other way to get to their schools," says Dr. Richard Gallagher, director of the Parenting Institute at the NYU Child Study Center.

For those parents who wonder how and when they should start allowing their kids more freedom, there's no clear-cut answer. Child experts discourage a one-size-fits-all approach to

parenting. What's right for Skenazy's nine-year-old could be inappropriate for another one. It all depends on developmental issues, maturity, and the psychological and emotional makeup of that child. Several factors must be taken into account, says Gallagher. "The ability to follow parent guidelines, the child's level of comfort in handling such situations, and a child's general judgment should be weighed."

Gallagher agrees with Skenazy that many nine-year-olds are ready for independence like taking public transportation alone. "At certain times of the day, on certain routes, the subways are generally safe for these children, especially if they have grown up in the city and have been taught how to be safe, how to obtain help if you are concerned for your safety, and how to avoid unsafe situations by being observant and on your toes."

But even with more traffic and fewer sidewalks, modern parents do have one advantage their parents didn't: the cell phone. Being able to check in with a child anytime goes a long way toward relieving parental angst and may help parents loosen the apron strings a little sooner. Skenazy got a lot of flak because she didn't give her kid her cell phone because she thought he'd lose it and wanted him to learn to go it alone without depending on mom—a major tenet of free-range parenting. But most parents are more than happy to use cell phones to keep tabs on their kids.

And for those who like the idea of free-range kids but still struggle with their inner helicopter parent, there may be a

middle way. A new generation of GPS cell phones with tracking software make it easier than ever to follow a child's every movement via the Internet—without seeming to interfere or hover. Of course, when they go to college, those kids might start objecting to being monitored as if they're on parole.

Answer these on a separate piece of paper to make up a single daily grade:

1. Define “**coddled**”:
2. What are the chances a child will be taken by a stranger?
3. According to the text, 90% of people who molest children are someone

_____.

4. Have child death rates increased or decreased?

5. What percentage of students walk to school today?

_____ %

6. What problem is created by students not walking as much?

7. Define “**ubiquitous**”:

8. According to the text, how many kids, ages 5 to 17, take care of themselves after school?
9. What modern device is helping parents now that didn't exist in previous generations?
10. “Of course, when they go to college, those kids might start objecting to being monitored as if they're on parole.” What is the author suggesting children are being treated like by using this simile?

Short one page essay (replaces a single daily grade):

Write a one page *persuasive* essay where you argue which sort of parenting is best, helicopter or free-range. Choose only one side. You must use **2 examples** to explain your choice; you may use the article above and the novel *The Glass Castle* for examples. The essay must be written on 26-line STAAR paper provided by Mr. G.