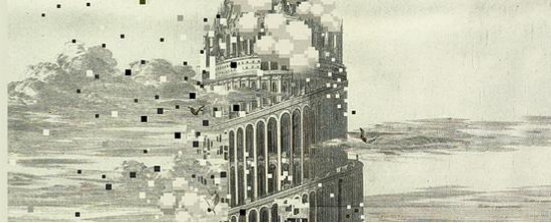


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After Babel



Good News For Anxious Kids (And Parents)

A simple homework project can make your child more ready to face the world.

LENORE SKENAZY

NOV 2 · GUEST POST



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[Note from Jon Haidt]

When my family moved to New York City in 2011, we got to know Lenore Skenazy, who had by then earned herself the nickname of “America’s Worst Mom” for reasons she’ll explain below. She had recently written a book titled [Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children](#). That book—and Lenore’s friendship—convinced my wife and me to trust our children to go outside, run local errands, and walk to school beginning in 3rd and 4th grades, which was around two years earlier than the norm at their school (but two years behind the norm when we were growing up). The effects of giving our children independence were transformative, not just on them, but on us. They *needed* small challenges in order to develop self-confidence. We *needed* exposure to treat our anxiety. Each time we were exposed to one of our children doing something competently and safely without adult supervision, our anxieties decreased.

I thought Lenore’s work was so important that I helped her found a nonprofit called [Let Grow](#), along with New York businessman Daniel Shuchman, who was the Chairman of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Expression ([FIRE](#)), and Boston

College psychology professor [Peter Gray](#), an expert on the [importance of free play](#). Our mission is *to make it easy, normal, and legal to give kids back the independence they need to grow into confident, competent, happy adults*. (Please [join LetGrow!](#))

Throughout the time that I've known Lenore, rates of adolescent depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide have [risen, fairly steadily, with the sharpest increases](#) for girls and young women. The central argument of my new book is that the adolescent mental health crisis erupted in the early 2010s because it marked the decisive end of the healthy, normal, human "play-based childhood," which was replaced by the high-tech and inhuman "phone-based childhood." (You can pre-order [The Anxious Generation](#) now.) The After Babel Substack is about reversing that "great rewiring of childhood. LetGrow is restoring play-based childhood. Lenore, Peter Gray, and I all believe that when children are told that the world is dangerous and then denied opportunities to develop normal life skills—such as walking to a store without an adult—they will turn into adolescents who are at higher risk of depression, anxiety and a general sense of passivity.

So what would happen if we were to give children the chance to do things that used to be considered normal life skills for children? Magic is what happens, as Lenore explains below.

— Jon

We've all heard about the [youth mental health crisis](#) (probably too much, if you follow this Substack). Many of us have experienced the heartache of seeing it up close.

A simple, fast solution would be a godsend, whether it helped a lot or even just a little. And if it's free? Even better. So let me pitch you an idea—one that I put out in [The New York Times in September](#)—with a little back story first.

In 2008, I let my 9-year-old ride the subway alone in New York City, where we live, and wrote [a column](#) about it. This caused [a media firestorm](#): How dare I send my kid into the bowels of the earth without an adult – or even a phone? The controversy

landed me on every possible talk show where I kept trying to explain that I LOVE safety – helmets, mouth guards, seat belts—but still think kids can do way more on their own than our fearful culture lets them.

This message did not land. Over and over the interviewers recalled how, generally as Gen X kids themselves (born 1965-1980), they rode their bikes till the streetlights came on. Loved it! But—they'd add: *Times have changed.*



Lenore on [Entertainment Tonight](#)

That was all it took to shut down almost any discussion of giving kids back some independence.

But here's the thing: I agree that times have changed. However, it's not that our kids are [less safe](#). It's us adults who have become [less willing to trust them](#) in the world.¹ We watch them, ferry them, "helicopter" them [like never before](#), for a couple of reasons.

In part, Gen X came of age in the "[milk carton](#)" era – the time in the mid-'80s when missing kids' pictures were printed on milk cartons, and no one bothered explaining that most of them, then and now, were not snatched by strangers. [Most missing kids](#)

[are runaways, "throwaways," or taken in custodial disputes.](#) (Or they're at their friend's house and forgot to call.)

Gen X and subsequent generations were also raised in a world shaped by murder-centric media. The "Eyewitness" and "Action News" formats invented in 1965 and 1970, respectively, [spread quickly once](#) local stations discovered the cheapest and most compelling content they could serve up was crime. So whether the crime rate was going up (as it was in the '70s, '80s, and early '90s) [or down](#) (as it has been pretty steadily ever since, with an upswing during COVID), it always looked like it was raining blood outside. When cable news debuted in the '80s, we could be terrified [24/7](#).

Anyway, I ended up writing a book summing up how we got so afraid for our kids – worrying about everything they do, see, read, watch, touch, try, and lick – and called it [Free-Range Kids](#).

Which brings me (at last!) to my simple suggestion for addressing the youth mental health crisis.

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In that recent *New York Times* essay I co-authored with Long Island University Associate Professor of Psychology Camilo Ortiz, we proposed, first off, that a lack of independence is infantilizing kids and making them feel unfit for the world. This is something we see in the data: Over the decades, [as children's independence has declined, their rates of anxiety have soared.](#)

Of course, some kids are more [genetically prone](#) to anxiety disorders, and some living situations are so tough, they'd increase anyone's anxiety. But if the problem, at least in part, is simply that many kids are growing up over-supervised, the solution would be simple, too: Start letting them do more things on their own.

Great! But how do we, as worried parents, begin to feel comfortable enough to let go?

After all, this [just-out study](#) from the University of Michigan's C.S. Mott Children's Hospital found that while parents of kids 5-11 see the benefit of having their child do things by themselves, there is “a sizable gap between parent attitudes and actions.” I.e., most parents know it's good to let go, and *want* to—but can't.

There are many approaches to change that, but among the easiest and most powerful is via the very thing that has hijacked a whole lot of kids' autonomy—*homework*.

Teachers can assign students something called [The Let Grow Experience](#). It's a series of homework assignments, where students are told to go home and do something new, on their own, *with* their parents' permission — but *without* their parents.

At first, it's not just the parents who may be a little hesitant! Kids can be, too:

”I was hesitant to try walking my dog alone because I was scared that he would get loose from the leash or a scary man would take me.”

”I was afraid to climb a tree because I was scared I was going to fall and break a bone.”

”I was afraid to try and cook because there's an open flame and I could get hurt.”

”I was hesitant to use a sharp knife as my parents had never let me before.”

Those are statements from 7th graders (ages 12 and 13) in suburban New York who were given the Let Grow Experience. But with the assignments to prod them—and prod their parents—these young people finally ventured out of their comfort zones.

At that school and so many others, kids started to make meals for their family, or [play outside](#), or run errands after school. They ordered pizza by phone—something that had daunted a whole lot of them. One California 5th grader took himself to his haircut appointment ... and came home with a mohawk. Yikes. But after that, his mom told me, he also started doing his homework by himself.



Boy doing one of his Let Grow Projects. (Watch [here](#))



Girl doing one of her Let Grow Projects.

And, as Camilo and I wrote in *The Times*:

Sometimes the impact is a little goofier. Ever since her elementary school started doing the Let Grow Project, one principal told Lenore, “fewer kids are sticking their feet out.”

“They’d been tripping each other?” Lenore asked.

“No,” said the principal, “fewer kids are asking their teacher to tie their shoes.”

Hearing about the success of the students’ Let Grow Projects, including in [alleviating some anxiety](#), Camilo started wondering if independence could work as an actual *treatment* for anxiety. Together with PhD candidate Matt Fastman, he designed a pilot study to find out.

They recruited five kids, ages 9-14, who’d been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Each kid and their parents came in (or Zoomed) for five private sessions with Camilo, once a week. But instead of working on reducing their anxiety by exposing them to the things they feared (which is “exposure therapy”), Camilo asked them what they *wanted* to try on their own—something they thought would be fun, or exciting. Think of it as exposure to the upside of independence.

For instance, one 10-year-old patient was afraid to go up or downstairs at home by himself. But instead of being asked to practice sitting upstairs alone for a little bit each day (exposure therapy), Camilo had him make a list of “independence activities” he wanted to try. One of these was walking home from school, alone. So that’s what the boy decided to do. His mother was so worried, she took the day off work.

Walk he did. Then he started walking home every day. For another activity, he took a solo ride on the Long Island Railroad.

Two months later, on the first day of middle school, students were told they could bring their parents to help them find their lockers, homerooms, etc. Most did. But this boy told his parents, “I got this.” This was a boy who wouldn’t go up or downstairs by himself in his own home.

Yes, we know: a study of five kids is not proof of anything. But the fact that all five kids went from feeling worried “most of the time” to feeling worried “a little bit of the time” should give us hope, and a reason to try it ourselves and see what happens.

The idea certainly struck a chord. The 800+ comments on the *Times* piece ranged from basically, “This makes so much sense!” to “Nice idea, but what if someone calls 911 when they see my kid outside?” Let Grow is aware of [that issue](#) and has helped pass “Reasonable Childhood Independence” laws in eight states. These clarify that “neglect” is when you put your kid in serious, obvious danger – not anytime you take your eyes off them. We’re working in more states now, including California. ([Info here.](#))

But then there was also the age-old comment, “Times have changed.”

Yes, they have. There are iPhones now. School shootings. Social media, political insanity, climate change—you name it. Each of these can impact childhood and kids’ mental health. But children are still the same species they were a generation or two ago. They are still built to explore, play, and help out in real ways—not always supervised.

If our intervention is as simple as it seems (and it is), why not try it? Parents can start easily by signing Let Grow’s “[Pledge of Independence.](#)” We’ll email a series of 10 actions—one a week—to take at home. (Free!) Or download our [Independence Kit](#), an at-home version of the Let Grow Experience. (Also free.)

[Our school programs](#) provide maximum impact by creating collective action. In addition to The Let Grow Experience implementation guide we also have information on how to start a [Let Grow Play Club](#). Check these out and please share with any teachers, principals, headmasters, or even school boards you know. All these materials are free, too.

Therapists and school counselors can [request Camilo’s Independence Therapy manual here](#). No charge!

And of course, if you’d like to support Let Grow’s efforts to grow this movement, that would be terrific. Here’s [our donations page](#).

“For me, this was the calculation,” one astute *Times* commenter wrote: “A very small risk of something bad happening to my children when starting at about six years old, they walked to the school bus stop, the library, the park, a friend’s house. vs. an almost certainty that not letting them do those things would tell them, without my even speaking, that they were not capable of those things.”

It’s time to give kids the ultimate anxiety buster: Independence.

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P.S. from Camilo Ortiz:

Does this independence stuff only work in upscale neighborhoods? No.

I was born in Colombia. When my family came to America in the ‘70s, we lived in a single room in a basement. After my parents divorced, I was raised by my mom who was working full-time. Often left to my own devices in a working-class neighborhood considered dangerous, I did get into some risky situations. But that’s how I learned to manage. I actually credit those experiences with giving me the persistence, courage, and flexibility that have made me who I am.

Being poor already puts a kid at a disadvantage. The benefits of independence can’t only be reserved for their better-off counterparts. Even working-class kids in tough neighborhoods can thrive when given a little more freedom, as I saw for myself.

To Learn More:

- Camilo’s [“Independence Therapy”](#) manual for therapists
- All of Let Grow’s school materials, including The Let Grow Experience [implementation guide](#)
- [Let Grow’s tips for parents](#)

Video: Let Grow Project Can Help Kids with Anxiety



Video: Eighth graders reflect upon the anti-anxiety impact of doing The Let Grow Experience 20 times as seventh graders.

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See Chapters 4, 5, and 6 in Jean Twenge's new book, [Generations](#).



A guest post by

Lenore Skenazy

President and co-founder of Let Grow ([LetGrow.org](#)), the nonprofit promoting childhood independence. Founder of the Free-Range Kids movement. For more info, Google "America's Worst Mom."

Really

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