

Parental Pickle

Have you heard about the controversy of Lenore Skenazy? She is the New York mom who is under fire for letting her 10-year-old son ride the subway alone. I would not put my kids on a subway alone, but us here (*taking on a sudden hickish accent...*) are country folk, after all, and even I didn't ride the subway when I was in New York three months ago. But I trust that Ms. Skenazy made the right decision for her child... why? Because I think that parents these days NEED to be trusted to make the right decisions for their children! I believe that we are in the midst of an age where we are much too over-protective of our young-uns. And those parents who aren't utterly over-protective are left to a cruel and unusual punishment of media scrutiny... If you follow and/or agree with what I'm saying, you will enjoy the writing of Lenore Skenazy:

The last word: Advice from 'America's worst mom'

A year ago, journalist Lenore Skenazy caused a media sensation when she let her 9-year-old ride New York City's subway by himself. In a new book, she explains why she has no regrets.

About a year ago, I let my 9-year-old ride the New York subway alone for the first time. I didn't do it because I was brave or reckless or seeking a book contract. I did it because I know my son the way you know your kids. I knew he was ready, so I let him go. Then I wrote a column about it for The New York Sun. Big deal, right?

Well, the night the column ran, someone from the Today show called me at home to ask, Did I really let my son take the subway by himself?

Yes.

Just abandoned him in the middle of the city and told him to find his way home?

Well, abandoned is kind of a strong word, but ... yes, I did leave him at Bloomingdale's.

In this day and age?

No, in Ladies' Handbags.

Oh, she loved that. Would I be willing to come on the air and talk about it?

Sure, why not?

I had no idea what was about to hit me.

A day later, there across from me was Ann Curry looking outrageously pretty and slightly alarmed, because her next guest (the one right before George Clooney) just might be criminally insane. By way of introduction, she turned to the camera and asked, "Is she an enlightened mom or a really bad one?"

The shot widened to reveal ... me. And my son Izzy. And some "parenting expert" perched on that famous couch right next to us, who, I soon learned, was there to Teach Us a Lesson.

I quickly told the story about how Izzy, the 9-year-old, had been begging me to let him try to find his way home on his own from someplace, anyplace, by subway.

I know that may sound a little scary, but it's not. Here in New York, families are on the subway all the time. It's extremely, even statistically, safe. Whatever subterranean terror you see Will Smith battling in the movies goes home when the filming stops—probably to New Jersey. Our city's murder rate is back to where it was in 1963. And, by the way, it's probably down wherever you live, too.

That's why letting Izzy find his way home alone seemed like a fine idea. Not dangerous. Not crazy. Not even very hard. My husband and I talked about it and agreed that our boy was

ready. So on that sunny Sunday when I took him to that big, bright store, I said those words we don't say much anymore.

"Bye-bye! Have fun!"

I didn't leave him defenseless, of course. I gave him a subway map, a transit card, \$20 in case of emergencies, and some quarters to make a call. But, no, I did not give him a cell phone. Because although I very much trusted him to get himself home, I was a lot less sure he'd get the phone there.

And remember: He had quarters.

Anyway, it all turned out fine. One subway ride, one bus ride, and one hour or so later, my son was back home, proud as a peacock (who happens to take public transportation). I only wrote about his little adventure because when I told the other fourth-grade moms at the schoolyard about it, they all said the same thing.

You let him WHAT?

The more polite said things like, "Well that's fine, and I'll let my son do that, too ... when he's in college."

So—back to the Today show. After Izzy tells Ann how easy the whole thing was, she turns to the Parenting Expert—a breed that seems to exist only to tell us parents what we're doing wrong and why this will warp our kids forever.

This one is appalled at what I've done. She looks like I just asked her to smell my socks. She says that I could have given my son the exact same experience of independence, but in a much "safer" way—if only I had followed him or insisted he ride with a group of friends.

"Well, how is that the 'exact same experience' if it's different?" I demanded. "Besides, he was safe! That's why I let him go, you fear-mongering hypocrite, preaching independence while warning against it!"

Well, I didn't get all of that out, exactly, but I did get out a very cogent, "Gee, um ... " Anyway, it didn't even matter, because as soon as we left the set, my phone rang. It was MSNBC. Could I be there in an hour?

Then Fox News called. Could I be there with Izzy that afternoon? MSNBC called back: If I did the show today, would I still promise to come back with Izzy to do it again over the weekend, same place, same story?

And suddenly, weirdly, I found myself in that place you always hear about: the center of a media storm. It was kind of fun, but also kind of terrifying—because everyone was weighing in on my parenting skills. Reporters queried from China, Israel, Australia, Malta. The English wanted to know, "Are we wrapping our children in cotton wool?" To which I boldly replied, "What the heck is cotton wool?" (Turns out to be the kind of cotton in cotton balls.)

The media dubbed me "America's Worst Mom." (Go ahead—Google it.) But that's not what I am.

I really think I'm a parent who is afraid of some things (bears, cars) and less afraid of others (subways, strangers). But mostly I'm afraid that I, too, have been swept up in the impossible obsession of our era: total safety for our children every second of every day. The idea that we should provide it and actually could provide it. It's as if we don't believe in fate anymore, or good luck or bad luck. No, it's all up to us.

Childhood really has changed since today's parents were kids, and not just in the United States. Australian children get stared at when they ride the bus alone. Canadian kids stay inside playing videogames. After I started a blog called Free Range Kids, I heard from a dad in Ireland who lets his 11-year-old play in the local park, unsupervised, and now a mom down the street won't let her son go to their house. She thinks the dad is reckless.

What has changed in the English-speaking world that has made childhood independence taboo? The ground has not gradually gotten harder under the jungle gym. The bus stops have not crept farther from home. Crime is actually lower than it was when most of us were growing up. So there is no reality-based reason that children today should be treated as more helpless and vulnerable than we were when we were young.

If parents all around us are clutching their children close, it's easy to understand why: It's what pop culture is telling us to do. Stories of kidnappings swamp the news. Go online, and you can find a map of local sex offenders as easily as the local Victoria's Secret (possibly in the same place). Meantime, if you do summon the courage to put your kids on a bus or a bench or a bike, other parents keep butting in: An unwatched child is a tragedy waiting to happen.

Here's a typical letter addressed to me at Free Range Kids:

"I understand that you probably don't want your children to grow up afraid and not able to survive as independent adults," she wrote. "On the other hand, I think you're also teaching them that there is nothing to fear, and that isn't correct. It's survival of the fittest, and if they don't know who/what the enemy is, how will they avoid it? There are many, many dangers to protect them from, and it does take work—that's what parenting is. If you want them to run wild and stay out of your hair, you shouldn't have had them."

I agree that it makes sense to teach your kids about danger and how best to avoid it. Just like you want to teach them to stop, drop, and roll if they're ever in a fire. But then? Then you have to let them out again, because the writer is wrong when she says, "There are many, many dangers to protect them from."

There are not. Mostly, the world is safe. Mostly, people are good. To emphasize the opposite is to live in the world of

tabloid TV. A world filled with worst-case scenarios, not the world we actually live in, which is factually, statistically, and, luckily for us, one of the safest periods for children in the history of the world.

Like the housewives of the 1950s, today's children need to be liberated. Unlike the housewives of the '50s, the children can't do it themselves. Though I'd love to see hordes of kids gathering for meetings, staging protests, and burning their baby kneepads—and maybe they will—it is really up to us parents to start re-normalizing childhood. That begins with us realizing how scared we've gotten, even of ridiculously remote dangers.

We have to be less afraid of nature and more willing to embrace the idea that some rashes and bites are a fair price to pay in exchange for appreciating the wonder of a cool-looking rock or an unforgettable fern.

When we watch TV, we have to remind ourselves that its job is to terrify and disgust us so that we'll keep watching in horror. It is doing an excellent job on both fronts.

We have to learn to remind the other parents who think we're being careless when we loosen our grip that we are actually trying to teach our children how to get along in the world, and that we believe this is our job. A child who can fend for himself is a lot safer than one forever coddled, because the coddled child will not have Mom or Dad around all the time. Adults once knew what we have forgotten today. Kids are competent. Kids are capable. Kids deserve freedom, responsibility, and a chance to be part of the world.

I have to be honest, though: I write all this in a kind of shaky mood because I just got a call from the police. This morning, I put Izzy, now 10, on a half-hour train ride out to his friend's house. It sounds like I'm a recidivist, but really: His friend's family was waiting at the other end to

pick him up, and he's done this a dozen times already. It is a straight shot on a commuter railroad. This particular time, however, the conductor found it outrageous that a 10-year-old should be traveling alone, and summoned the police, who arrived as my son disembarked.

When the officer phoned me at home, I told him the truth (while my heart stood still): We had actually inquired of the railroad what age a child can travel alone and were told there was no specific regulation about this.

Later I looked up the official rules: A child only has to be 8 to ride alone on the railroad or subway. Good rule.

(From the book Free Range Kids by Lenore Skenazy. © 2009 by Lenore Skenazy. Reprinted with permission of the publisher, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)