

Free Range Parenting.

On the back of my daycare's business card is one of my favourite quotes by Hodding Carter: "There are two lasting bequests we can give our children: One is roots, the other is wings." Both are equally important but more and more today we seem to be content bringing up turkeys rather than eagles.

This quote came to mind when I first read about Utah's 'Free Range Parenting Bill' on someone's Facebook page recently. According to this bill, which has apparently been signed into law, children of 'sufficient age' may be allowed to undertake a number of independent activities, including walking or cycling to school, visiting malls and recreational facilities, playing out of doors, and even remaining at home on their own, without their parents being accused of neglect. According to the Free Range Parenting law, as long as children are fed, clothed and cared for the authorities cannot take them away from their parents.

True to form, most of the comments on that page were negative, predicting wide spread abduction of children from various parks, malls and other unsupervised facilities. My first response was thankfulness that when I brought up my children I was unaware of the multitude of parenting rules I should have been adhering to.

Yes, we had permissive parents whose kids happily went their own way with little or no rules, authoritarian parents who were heavy on discipline and, often, the wooden spoon, and authoritative parents who somehow managed to hit the happy medium between the two. But to the best of my knowledge helicopter parenting, as an extreme example of modern childcare, was an unheard-of phenomenon. Who had the time or energy to keep up with the kids 24/7?

As long as they were back before dark and relatively in one piece most parents were happy.

Of course, there are countries where circumstances are such that even adults are wary about walking the streets on their own and helicopter or hovering parenting is almost essential. But in North America, and especially in Canada, this type of hyper parenting seems a little ridiculous. In answer to the fear mongers who warn of wholesale child abduction the reality is that very few children are ever abducted by strangers.

According to police statistics, of the 46,718 children reported missing in 2011, only 25 were classified as being abducted by a stranger. And [a study carried out in 2003](#) looking at the 90 missing children reports which were classified as stranger abduction in 2000 and 2001, found that only two of them had, in fact, been abducted by people who were neither a relative or close family friend. In other words, the vast majority were taken by someone they knew.

And in most cases where children are abducted by someone other than a close family member they were teenagers, a number of whom went willingly with their abductors.

I think the majority of parents are aware that the world out there is not necessarily peopled by bogey men (or women), and as long as they take reasonable precautions their children will come back from the local park, store or school no worse for wear for their adventures. Unfortunately, though, there are an awful lot of people, most of whom do not appear to have children themselves, who are very quick to interfere when they see a child doing anything they consider in the least bit dangerous.

There is the world of difference between abusing or neglecting a child and allowing them to experience independence, but these self-appointed judges will readily report parents for the latter.

Parents have been reported for allowing children to walk home on their own, for playing in the local park unsupervised, and [even for playing unsupervised in their own, fenced, back yard](#). In one extreme case a neighbour called the police when parents were delayed on their way home from work and their eleven-year-old played baseball in their yard for 90 minutes while he waited for them. When the parents arrived they were handcuffed, fingerprinted and retained overnight, and their children, 11 and 4 years old were removed from them for a month. [The trauma to the children during this experience is unimaginable.](#)

Most of these incidents happened in the US but Canada is certainly not immune to this insanity. A stay at home mom from Winnipeg was reported and investigated by Child and Family Services [for letting her children play in their own backyard](#) while she was busy indoors.



Photo by [Jessica To'oto'o](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The sad truth is that most children no longer have the opportunity to play freely without adult control. This may be due to technology with the ever-present enticement of computer games and television, or it may be because parents are afraid of either the perceived dangers of outdoor play or the judgement of outsiders. Whatever the reason there has been a gradual but 'dramatic decline' over the past 60 years in children's opportunity to play independently. And according to [Peter Gray, Ph.D](#), a research professor at Boston College, over the same period there has been a corresponding increase in childhood mental and especially emotional disorders.

Hopefully Utah's Free Range Parenting Bill is an indication that the tide is slowly turning and that soon children will be allowed to be children again.