

Parental fears aren't based on facts

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Memories of the carefree summer days of my childhood are among my fondest. Aside from a six-week stint of summer camp, the days were occupied with ventures into nearby woods, endless trips on my bicycle, and aimless wandering about town with friends.

Weekly I'd be handed a five- or ten-dollar bill to walk the five blocks to Safeway and get groceries for the family. Many a time my mother would kick me out of the house, instructing me to return in time for dinner. With no cellphone, it was an illuminated streetlight that cued me to return home.

For us kids, everything was outdoors. Television cartoons were limited to Saturday mornings, and video games were confined to arcades and limited to the number of quarters you had. There was little formal programming for kids, and the annoying term "playdate" hadn't yet entered the lexicon. Like the 1985 movie *The Goonies*, childhood was mostly unsupervised, independent, autonomous, and free.

But today parents and kids alike seem to be nervous wrecks. Leaving your child at home alone conjures thoughts of impending catastrophe. We don't allow our kids to walk the neighborhood alone, go to the Miami Shores or El Portal tot lots by themselves, or even walk to Miami Shores Elementary. Instead of playing outside, they are stressed with excessive homework or they rot in front of their electronic screens.

Roots and Wings

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor
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Fear, anxiety, and overzealous parenting have taken hold of us. From websites that purport to show the proximity of every sex offender in your neighborhood to hyperventilating posts on social media that hype threats of crime and tragedy, we now see the world as a scary, threatening, and dangerous place. Above all else, it seems, we think we must keep our kids indoors to protect them.

High dives at local public pools and even backyard trampolines seem to be relics of the past. And worse -- in 2014 a Maryland couple, Danielle and Alexander Meitiv, were actually investigated (and ultimately cleared) for neglect by child welfare officials after they let their ten- and six-year-old children walk home by themselves from a local park just a mile or so from where they live.

Locals intuitively know something is amiss. Chris Gaviria recalls growing up in Miami Shores, biking from one end of the village to the other, and passing summer doldrums fishing in the canals. Councilman Sean Brady recounts that he'd routinely cross Biscayne Boulevard to walk to elementary school, something he soon hopes to teach his own eight-year-old.

On a trip to the Miami Shores tot lot, which posts rules that all youngsters need adult supervision, random parents immediately lit up about the loss of childhood self-reliance. Resident Nick Timbaldi, eyeing his daughter, bemoans the fact that kids don't live the life he did growing up. Reminiscing about a childhood where he'd ride his bike until 9:00 p.m., he somewhat guiltily notes how sheltered today's kids are. "They might as well be bubble-wrapped!" Laura Fiumara of North Miami: "We're eating stress."

Yet the stress we're eating is primarily of our own creation. We fear for our children, we look at every stranger as a potential kidnapper, and we act as though threats loom on every corner. But the crime wave that exists is the one in our heads.

According to City-Data.com, from 2002 to 2016, overall crime has dropped by about 30 percent in Miami Shores, 33 percent in Biscayne Park, and 24 percent in El Portal. What has risen is the *perception* of worsening crime. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in late 2016 found that 57 percent of all registered voters believe crime has gotten worse since 2008, despite double-digit percentile decreases in both violent and property crime rates for the period.

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Locally, the three-year trend 2012-2015 for “accidental child deaths” in ZIP codes 33138, 33161, 33150, 33167, and 33168 is about one every three years, according to Florida’s Agency for Health Care Administration. That is tragic for that child’s family, but when put it in perspective of a total child/youth population for those ZIP codes -- more than 37,000 -- the chances of accidental death equate a minuscule 0.00003 percent.

As in baseball, keep your eye on the ball, or in this case, the statistics. There’s no data-driven evidence for our fear.

Yet fear and anxiety persist. The more that safety and order prevail, in fact, the more we perceive anarchy. A deeper dive into our collective psyche attributes our dim view to what sociologists call “pessimistic bias,” the conviction that things are worse than they are and used to be.

And the truth is that dangers encountered on the Internet by children arguably outpace the outside world. Sex, violence, bullying, and predators are more likely to be stalking our children online than in our local parks. We require adult supervision at our parks, but how many of us supervise our kids’ online activities?

I’m not promoting parental neglect, but I’m frankly more afraid of Miami’s drivers who careen like unguided ballistic missiles. For most kids, a visit to the recreation fields means crossing the four lanes of NE 6th Avenue or Biscayne Boulevard, where drivers on cell phones whiz by at 45 mph. (Planned pedestrian crosswalks on NE 2nd and NE 6th avenues will provide some relief.) And of course, if there were drug dealers and gangs on the corner, it would be irresponsible to allow kids to roam freely.

“Kids are play-deprived nowadays,” says Katherine Reynolds Lewis, author of *The Good News about Bad Behavior* in a recent NPR interview. “Two or three decades ago, children were roaming neighborhoods in mixed-age groups, playing pretty unsupervised. They were able to resolve disputes. They planned their time. They managed their games. They had a lot of autonomy, which also feeds self-esteem and mental health.”

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Utah recently became the first state to allow parents to adopt the “free-range kids” philosophy without fear of being accused of neglect. The state law allows youngsters whose basic needs are met to “travel to commercial or recreational facilities, play outside, and remain at home unattended.”

Let’s admit that it takes an affirmative effort to free ourselves from irrational fears and anxieties, particularly as they relate to our children. Accompany your kids on local walks, and then begin to nudge them out the door...and out of the nest.

Build their confidence to venture out on their own and to interact appropriately with the outside world. It’s said that parents’ prime responsibility is give their children roots and wings: roots to know where home is, and wings to fly off and practice what has been taught them.

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