



Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts With Worry)

Lenore Skenazy. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

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To cite this article: Sharon BlackwellJonesPhD (2013) Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts With Worry), *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, 24:3, 261-264, DOI: [10.1080/08975353.2013.817270](https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2013.817270)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08975353.2013.817270>



Published online: 13 Sep 2013.



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MEDIA REVIEW

Edited by Cathy M. Hudgins, PhD

***Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts With Worry)*. Lenore Skenazy. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.**

In the book *Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children Without Going Nuts With Worry*, Skenazy examines the many factors that hold parents hostage with worry while trying to raise children in current times, and looks into how to get children the same kind of childhood freedoms other generations have experienced. This book was an easy read that can augment any parent education class and assist practitioners working with families struggling with how to get children gradually ready for new responsibilities as they develop. It is particularly geared toward parents who are on either side of the continuum of being a helicopter parent or a negligent parent. “Free range” is the antonym to helicopter parenting where the motto is to “world-proof your baby” to allow them to foster independence and help kids become self-assured and contributing members of society.

This 225-page book is divided into two parts: The “14 Free Range Commandments” and their detailed descriptions are first outlined, and then the “Free Range Guide to Life” is presented. Finally, Web sites, blogs, and books of interest are used as supplemental materials to bring the free range parenting skills to life. By starting with the 14 commandments, the author goes chapter by chapter, dispelling myths about childhood and parenting that have changed current parenting trends. These include the following:

1. Know when to worry.
2. Turn off the news.
3. Avoid experts.
4. Boycott baby knee pads.
5. Do not think like a lawyer.
6. Ignore the blamers.
7. Eat chocolate.
8. Study history.
9. Be worldly.
10. Get braver.

11. Relax.
12. Fail.
13. Lock them out.
14. Listen to your kids.

By presenting the material this way, the author illustrates how childhood was a much more carefree time for parents when they were growing up, and how children today deserve a similar experience, thus providing a “child development booster” (p. xvii). Each chapter starts with one commandment and its description; and at the conclusion of every chapter, three suggestions are given for the reader for implementation. The first suggestion is called a “baby step” one may try as a free range parent. The second is labeled the “brave step,” which is one that would push the parent a little more. The final step is called the “giant leap,” where the reader would further push themselves to go outside of their box as they implement the new skills and perspectives. This part of the book was quite humorous, yet educational, while reaffirming facts like “children are statistically just as safe today as they were when we were growing up in the 70s, 80s and 90s” (p. 6). By using metaphors in the writing, like “Children are being sucked off of America’s lawns like yard trimmings” (p. 8) describing the lack of outdoor time kids get today, readers are able to visualize the commandments while discovering truths in the points illustrated. The presentation of the material in this manner asks parents to believe in themselves, yet challenges them to think about their current parenting practices and areas for growth.

The content of the first part of the book and the specific commandments do a great job of highlighting the many pressures today’s parents are facing while raising children. Some interesting points include the need to trust oneself or other seasoned parents instead of relying too heavily on the advice of experts. Additional topics include the need to get children to participate in free play and outdoor activities, as many schools today have noted a 40% decline in recess. This statistic reminds readers that the amount of time children are spending in their cars in their overscheduled lives is quite different than the experience previous generations had as children. The author then provides ways to get children and their families back outside.

The author goes on to suggest some clinical applications and solutions, including evaluating the pros and cons of situations parents are contemplating with their children, gradually giving children more freedom as they prove independence and competence. In addition, by asking questions like, “What are the odds of this negative event truly happening?,” parents may realize that a change can be made in the parent–child relationship without fearing a negative outcome. Skenazy provides practice for role-plays and practice ideas to try out, which help parents educate their children about safety and life skills while fostering a sense of independence.

“Let Them Eat Chocolate” (Commandment 5) and “Don’t Think Like a Lawyer” (Commandment 7) both present topics reaffirming the concept that there is no one way to raise children, and questions the notion that kids do not need an ideal childhood but, rather, parents who love them, trust them, and will help them develop. Again, helpful in this section were the well-laid out arguments for the free range parenting style in the conclusions to the commandments ending every chapter. The author tackles the concept of children needing failures in life and links them to stories of success, including Thomas Edison, Michael Jordan, and others who have used failure as a means for bouncing back and exceeding the odds of success in their given arenas. By highlighting that a little failure is okay, the author connects the lack of playtime children currently have to (a) fear of abduction, (b) increased technology use, (c) organized and over-structured activities, and (d) interactive toys that have limited their creativity and ability to “try new things.” Skenazy believes that if these things were given back to children, in addition to adding more “blank slate” toys in their lives, creativity would again thrive, and worrying about impending potential failures could be limited.

I was disappointed by the second part of the book, “The Free Range Guide to Life.” This part of the book goes through every potential issue parents may worry about, including animals, baseball bats, cell phones, choking hazards, and germs, to name a few. This part could be done differently, limiting the play-by-play and again trying to dispel myths about products and life’s worries. This section appears repetitive, but could be used as a tool to reiterate points made earlier if left in future editions. The topic of freeing parents from worry and giving them permission to leave the freezing bleachers in the Winter or smoldering stadium chairs in the Summer in fear of missing any possible experience of their children might help some parents move away from the new favorite pastime for activity: worry. By adding some questions or strategies to combat worry, shame, and guilt, this section could be reformatted to allow readers to gauge their own levels of free range and actually make changes immediately, with some guidance and structure.

Finally, the last section of the book lists helpful books, blogs, and movies recommended as helpful to free range parents. It is important to note that most of the films are classics, such as *Because of Winn Dixie* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. More current, mainstream films would have been helpful to highlight the parenting practices and styles discussed throughout the book.

In my opinion, I believe this book does a wonderful job at freeing some of the control and worry that many parents currently have. The major strengths of this book are the in-depth analyses of the commandments as a means to combat the helicopter parent ever present in today’s society. This work presents a bookshelf resource for clinicians and a bleacher read for parents trying to navigate children’s development. Overall, *Free-Range Kids*:

How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts With Worry) is a good option for educators, parents, and clinicians looking to teach the contemporary, yet basic, perspectives of parenting.

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