

by Mike Cooney



# **FREE-RANGE KIDS**

*Turning the tide on over-protective parenting*

## A CONVERSATION WITH LENORE SKENAZY



The world is a dangerous place. Scary even. And, somehow, we're supposed to raise our beloved children amongst all the chaos and gunfire! As parents, we carry the awesome responsibility of getting our kids through to adulthood relatively unscathed – doing our best to keep them safe from the myriad of sexual predators, water hazards and sharp kitchen objects.

To be honest, it's a wonder we even let them out of the house – such are the dangers and pitfalls of the wild outdoors ... In this age of CSI-styled television, media sensationalism and fear-based marketing, many parents are wrapping their precious cherubs up in cotton-wool – afraid of what *might* happen. Helicopter-parenting (think hovering!) has become rampant, and the good ol' days of "be back before dark!" appear to have gone forever.

Enter Lenore Skenazy!

Labelled '*America's Worst Mum*' (see panel, p17), she's begun a crusade to turn back the tide of over-protective parenting. Her controversial book '*Free-Range Kids*' has been a huge success, bringing some much-needed balance to modern mums and dads. We tracked her down in New York. And she gave us some insights on how to raise safe, self-reliant kids – while not going nuts with worry.

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**GRAPEVINE:** Can you define what you mean by 'free-range'? You see, that's often how we buy our eggs ...

**LENORE:** That's where I got the word! Originally my husband suggested we call it 'cage-free' – but 'free-range' sounded a little less bizarre!

*'Free-Range Kids'* is just a commonsense approach to parenting in over-protective times. And, personally, I interpret that as being just old-fashioned childhood – recognising that today's world (in terms

of crime) is no less safe than when most of us parents were growing up.

**GRAPEVINE:** You talk about crime-rates going down – is that true for most Western countries?

**LENORE:** It is in America and Canada – and I think Australia, too.

In America, the crime-rate is down to the levels of 1973! It just keeps going down! And yet, when I talk to parents, they often say they'd love their kids to have the kind of freedom they had: riding their bikes,

walking to school, playing outside with their friends until the street-lights came on. But they can't do it because "times have changed ..."

Then I surprise them and say, "Yes, I agree – times have changed. Times are actually safer now than when we were growing up!" And they nearly always disagree, saying it doesn't *feel* as safe. And you know what? It's true – it *doesn't* feel as safe.

But that's just feelings. And that's because our lives have been inundated with so much terrible news. Everything from 24 hour CNN to *Law & Order* to *CSI* ... all this relentless misery that sells so well. And we end up believing that it's

we turn off the TV and say, "What a crazy world we live in!" We become convinced that we actually *live* in that world.

But we don't – and I have proof that we don't!

I know a guy whose home is in the area where they often film *Law & Order* here in New York. It's a nice, quiet neighbourhood – and the irony is that, because it's so nice, so pleasant, so safe, they can film there! But, when you see it on TV, you see it with some horrible kidnapping or dead body!

Funnily enough, people have actually said to me, "How dare you let your son ride the subway? Don't you watch *Law & Order*?"

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actually as bad outside as it is inside on the television!

**GRAPEVINE:** So how do we get things back into perspective? I doubt if we can convince many people to throw away their TV sets!

**LENORE:** Someone wrote to my blog with this great analogy: If a Martian came to earth and wanted to understand what life is like down here, you could give him this choice: Does he want to know how 99.99% of people live their lives? Or does he want to know about the 0.01%?

Chances are he'd want to hear about the 99.99%. But when we turn on the TV, we see the 0.01% – the horrible stories that make the news, the horrible plots that keep us glued to *Law & Order*. And then

**GRAPEVINE:** So is that the problem? We confuse TV with real life, and end up being motivated by fear?

**LENORE:** Not just motivated – it's like we're *infiltrated* by fear. We're surrounded by scary, worst-case-scenarios! I gave a lecture just last night about how you can pretty-much sell parents anything if you convince them that their children are going to be snatched!

There are commercials where I live for these GPS devices. The commercials say, "You're at the foodcourt with Danny ... you look up, trying to decide whether to have the taco or the burrito ... and when you look down, where's Danny?" And they make you believe that, in the blink of an eye, Danny could be gone!



In Europe, a commercial for another GPS device shows a mum driving her son to school, and for some reason (*because something bad has to happen!*) she lets him out a block from the school gate. Sure enough, when the boy looks up he's facing some tall, mean, horrible guy – and the next thing you see (within a split second) he's in the trunk of the guy's car! In the following scene, the car's under an overpass and the man is pulling up his pants. But, thank God, the SWAT team's arriving, because while he was in the trunk the little boy had the presence of mind to text: “Mum, I'm in a trunk – come get me!”

**GRAPEVINE:** That sounds crazy!

**LENORE:** It *is* crazy! But if you're surrounded by those images ...

Look, I often hear from people on my website who, after grocery shopping, put their child in the car and then go to return the trolley. When they get back, there's

somebody yelling at them, “*Why did you leave your child in the car – he could be snatched!*” I mean, it becomes this actual mania on the part of people! They really believe that we're living in the equivalent of the Nazi era – when people were grabbed off the street and you never saw them again.

It upsets me, because nobody appreciates the fact that crime is down, that diphtheria has been vanquished, that polio is a thing of the past, that our water supply is clean, that we're living in relatively peaceful times. In fact, it's the safest time in the history of the world to be a child – at least in first-world countries. But we're squandering it, wasting it!

**GRAPEVINE:** This infiltration of fear ... is the media to blame?

**LENORE:** I think it's driven by a lot of things. The media – we were talking originally about television, but then there are all the parenting books and

magazines – it’s really hard to sell a magazine if you say, “*You probably don’t need this issue – all we’re going to do is include some recipes.*” But if you say “*Five things your child should never touch!*” or “*Is your child’s cot safe?*” ... those things sell!

There are two fears that parenting magazines and books play on: one is fear that your children won’t develop properly (or at least to their potential) – and the other is that they’ll die. For instance: there’s the germ-free soap dispenser pump ... and the countless developmental DVDs ... and mobiles that are black and white (otherwise your child will waste those first three months in the cot trying

electronic ‘leash’ – because your child isn’t safe walking on his own. There’s a child locator, with a piercing siren that goes off if your child gets more than 20 feet away from you. There’s a new ‘piggy-back’ device – so you can carry your child, up to age seven, around on your back all day!

It’s unbelievable what the marketplace is urging us to buy. But if they can make us think that our kids aren’t safe, they can get us believing, “I must have one of those!”

I was at a conference the other day about summer camps, and I spoke with a guy who was marketing a new thing that you strap onto your head while

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to make sense of colours, when she should just be concentrating on shapes)!

And then there’s famous Doctor Oz, who’s got a book out now about pregnancy. He’s telling you that you should start reading to your baby when he or she is *in utero!* But hang on: the baby’s under water – how could it possibly understand you? And what message could it possibly get? Like, “*Oh, this is the one about the three little pigs!*” They’re in the womb ... they haven’t yet opened their eyes ... they don’t know what a picture is ... and they certainly don’t know what a pig is!

But there it is: the worry that your child won’t develop enough.

**GRAPEVINE:** And the second fear – about dying?

**LENORE:** Well, there’s the GPS device, an



# AMERICA'S WORST MUM?

**A**BOUT A YEAR AGO, I LET MY nine-year-old ride the subway by himself. He'd been asking us to please take him someplace and let him find his way home by himself. So my husband and I discussed this. Our boy knows how to read a map, he speaks the language and we're New Yorkers. We're on the subway all the time.

That's how it came to be that one sunny Sunday, after lunch at *McDonald's*, I took him to *Bloomingdales* ... and left him in the handbag department.

I didn't leave him unprepared, of course! I gave him a map, a Metro-Card, coins for the phone and \$20 for emergencies. *Bloomingdales* sits on top of a subway station on our local line, and it's always crowded with shoppers. I believed he'd be safe. I believed he could figure out his way. And if he needed to ask someone for directions – which it turns out he did – I even believed the person would not think, “Gee, I was about to go home with my nice, new *Bloomingdales*’ shirt. But now I think I’ll abduct this adorable child instead.”

Long story short: he got home about 45 minutes later, ecstatic with independence. I wrote a little column about his adventure – and two days later I was on the *Today Show*, NPR, MSNBC and Fox News defending myself as NOT “America’s Worst Mum”!

The notion was that I had deliberately put my son in harm’s way (possibly to ‘prove’ something) and I was just incredibly lucky that he made it home. One NPR caller asked why I had given my son “one day of fun” even though he would probably end up dead by nightfall.

I launched my blog that weekend to explain my parenting philosophy: I believe in safety. I LOVE safety – helmets, car seats, safety belts. I believe in teaching children how to cross the street and even wave their arms to be noticed. I’m a safety geek! But I also believe our kids don’t need security guards every time they leave the house.

Our kids are safer than we think, and more competent, too. They deserve a chance to stretch and grow and do what we did – stay out till the street lights come on.



swimming. It's a band that has some sort of diode in it, and if your kid is underwater for too long – i.e. drowning – it emits some kind of piercing sound. So it's the equivalent of the bike helmet, except for swimming.

Look, I'm scared of drowning too, and I'm not sure that device is a terrible idea. But I can assure you that once one camp gets it, you won't want to be the camp

without it – otherwise you'll be seen as the camp that doesn't care if children drown ...

**GRAPEVINE:** Have you always been a 'free-range' parent? Did this approach come naturally?

**LENORE:** I wish I was a totally free-range parent! But I'm still nervous about plenty of stuff. People write and say “*You're my hero! I took my children camping last*

*weekend with only a spear, and we had so much fun! We cooked our own coyote – we're just like you!"* And I'm like, you're just like me? I wish! I can't even get my kids off the computer!

But what I've always trusted, I guess maybe more than the norm, is strangers. Other people. I do think that most people are good. And what I've always taught my kids is that you can talk to strangers – *you just can't go off with them.*

For 14 years I was a tabloid reporter at the *New York Daily News*. And one column I wrote was called 'Dinner at Your Place' – where I would go and eat dinner with any *Daily News* reader who invited me over. People would ask, "Aren't you worried that they're going to kill you when you get there?" And I was like, "No, they're really proud of their lamb stew, or their Jamaican rum cake, or whatever – and they want me to come and try it!"

And then I'd have these contests. One of them went like this: "If you're going to be sending your kids cookies at summer camp, let's see which ones are the best after they've been through the mail. So send me your cookies!" (This was great, because I was drowning in cookies – which I just love!)

But people were saying, "Aren't you worried that they're going to poison you?" And I was like, "No, they're really proud of their lemon-sugar cookies!" I really think the poisoners and murderers who might try to lure you in with their favourite food are few and far between ...

**GRAPEVINE:** But something that *does* come naturally to most of us is that we want our kids to be safe – right?

**LENORE:** Not only that, we want our children to achieve their potential, be happy and well-adjusted, have some friends, be

kind, and look both ways when crossing the street! It's just a question of how you interpret the world around you, and what you think your job is as a parent.

I *do* think my job is to keep my kids safe. And I taught them all that stuff – to the point where they were nauseous with boredom! But, since I *don't* think it's so UNSafe to go outside, I didn't think I had to prohibit that.

You see, there's a trade-off. People think, "*Better to be safe than sorry.*" And sometimes, when you're already safe, another modicum of safety isn't a great leap. Yet, other times, there's a huge trade-off in terms of what you're stopping your kids from having or doing.

**GRAPEVINE:** What sort of trade-off are you talking about? Should we be getting a little nervous about now?

**LENORE:** Maybe! But there is a trade-off when you opt for absolute safety. A 15-year-old boy wrote to me, saying his parents won't allow him outside because they're worried he'll be abducted or killed. So they drive him to school every day. And while he's home over the holidays he has nothing to do (because he can't go outside) except play video games and eat junk food. Which is fun for a while, but then he gets bored.

To me, the irony is: parents like this are so afraid of kidnappings that they've effectively kidnapped their own children! And the risk is that those kids are restless, they don't know the world, they might be a little more naïve, they might be a little too trusting, they don't develop their street-smarts – and they don't gain the resilience they would from getting on the wrong bus, going to the wrong part of town, and then finding their way back.



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**GRAPEVINE:** How does getting on the wrong bus develop resilience?

**LENORE:** I was in a classroom recently where the teacher had asked the students to each do a *free-range* project – something grown-up that they hadn't done before, but felt they were ready for. One of the kids decided to go visit his brother – and he *did* get on the wrong bus! He said he was frantic when he realised he was going the wrong way: “I practically screamed at the bus driver!”

He was clearly embarrassed by this, but the bus-driver explained how to get back: “Well, here's what you do. I'm going to give you a transfer and you're going to go

to the next corner where the street goes downtown. Then you'll take that bus and you'll head down ...”

And so the boy went over to the downtown bus, and he got on it. However, for some reason there was a mix-up with the transfer. But once again, the bus-driver understood what was happening, and let him get on.

When he told this story in class (it was two or three months after the event), he said, “And I still have the transfer!” He opened up his wallet, took it out and showed it to the class. I asked him why he kept it, and he simply said, “Oh, it's a souvenir.” But I realised it's more than

a souvenir: it's his way of remembering that when things are terrible and you feel foolish and stupid and terrified, all is not lost! You can get yourself out of a bad situation – you've done it before!

That's a gift that we want to give our kids. It's called *resilience*. It's called *self-confidence* – and that's why it's not called 'parent-assisted confidence!' It's self-confidence because you have to get it *yourSELF!*

So when people say, "*There's no trade-off. I'd rather my child just be safe!*" – I say, there IS: you're trading off real-life growing-up for the sake of keeping them in a bubble.

**GRAPEVINE:** A huge number of people have applauded your book – some even calling you a national hero! But what are

**GRAPEVINE:** So having free-range kids doesn't mean you no longer worry?

**LENORE:** No, no! I worry, I worry! Everyone does – I mean, if you've got kids, you're going to worry – right?

Look, if I thought my son was going to be robbed, *I wouldn't have put him on the train!* But it still didn't stop me from worrying ...

The thing is, it's rare here. Our crime rate is down to 1973 levels – and last year was the lowest murder-rate on record in New York City. But get this: every year they do a survey asking if crime is going up or down, and in the latest survey 73% of the people said "*It's going UP!*" – even though it went down by double digits last year!

That's what drives me crazy – perception

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*It's perception versus reality, and it drives me crazy. I really feel like our minds are being polluted by people with a vested interest in making us scared. Either because it sells air-time and keeps us glued to the TV, or because it sells a product and keeps us glued to our kids!*

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the most common criticisms from those who prefer the bubble?

**LENORE:** They always say: "*But what if he had died?*" And that's the question that trumps every question! I mean, if you think like that, you really can't afford to put your kid in a car – because cars are the number one way kids die! But people don't ask themselves, "*What if I was the one driving and he died?*"

I hear it all the time: "*How could you let your son do it? Wouldn't you feel terrible if ...*" And you know what? It still actually makes me feel terrible – because I don't want to tempt fate, I'm a regular person who worries about things too!

versus reality. And I really feel like our minds are being polluted by people with a vested interest in making us scared. Either because it sells air-time and keeps us glued to the TV, or because it sells a product and keeps us glued to our kids!

**GRAPEVINE:** You've come up with a number of '*Free-Range Commandments*' – right?

**LENORE:** Sure. And one of them is, "*Fail! It's the new 'succeed!'*" Now, of course, we don't want our kids to *only* fail. But if they don't fail sometimes, they won't learn that they can get back up and go on with their lives.

For example, we don't want our kids to



fall off a bike. Who does? But we do want them to learn how to ride. So we have two choices: We can hold onto their handlebars ... forever. That way they'll never, ever fall. Or we can wish them luck and then ... let go.

Chances are, if we do that, they will at some point fall. But when they get up again, they'll have two huge things going for them: Firstly, they'll know they can fall and get back up again. (If that's not a life-lesson, what is?) And secondly, they'll be learning how to actually ride a bike!

Most things in life take some tumbles before we get it right. As Thomas Edison said when asked how it felt to fail 10,000 times before he figured out the light bulb, "I haven't failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

**GRAPEVINE:** Got any more tips for those of us who need to take a few steps into the free-range world?

**LENORE:** Besides reading my book, you mean? Okay, a couple more ideas:

Volunteer to watch the kids who are waiting with your own kid for soccer to start, or school to open, whatever. Explain to the other parents that you're offering them a little free time. If they say no thanks, ask them to watch *your* kid!

Get a little perspective on this strange, scared parenting era we are living in by visiting a baby-store with your oldest living relative. Check out all the new gadgets – like baby kneepads and infrared video baby-monitors – and ask, "Which of these things did YOU need when you were raising us?" (Be prepared for a little scorn.)

Next time you're about to watch one of those crime shows, turn off the TV and take a walk outside instead – maybe with your kids. Talk to some neighbours, look around, get a feel for the place again. THIS is the world you're living in – not the one on TV!

Visit my website ([www.freerangekids.com](http://www.freerangekids.com)): you'll find lots of stories of parents gradually letting their kids go – and the kids coming back safe and sound.

Thankfully, in our 'enlightenment', we seem to be returning at last to the lifestyle



enjoyed by some of those lucky, clucking, real-live chickens – the good, old-fashioned, God-given *freedom to range!*

Our children deserve no less ...



**WHAT DO YOU THINK?  
HAVE YOUR SAY!**



GO TO GRAPEVINE'S FACEBOOK PAGE. SHARE YOUR POINT-OF-VIEW AND READ WHAT OTHERS RECKON.