

Parents are naturally protective of their children. They are often haunted by the possibility of injuries or sickness affecting their children. This makes them go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that their children are safe from all these. The ultimate question is does the fear have a strong basis or is it actually counter-productive for the children?

Kim Brooks has an interesting take on parental fears. She was once arrested for leaving her son alone in her car for a few minutes. According to her, the situation seemed safe enough to do so. This led her to consider why parents in the United States are fearful for their children's safety and whether or not they are justified to be afraid.

According to Brooks, the more dangerous cases such as kidnappings are rather rare thus parents should put their worries into more important risks in their children's lives such as physical and mental health.

On being arrested for leaving her child in the car despite the low-security risk

On that fateful day in March 2011, Brooks decides to carry out some quick shopping at a Target store at a suburban strip mall in Richmond, Virginia. She was due to catch a flight later in the day and was under a considerable amount of pressure.

It seemed rather obvious to her that a quick trip in and out of the store would not leave the child in danger. She left her child playing on the iPad. He preferred to stay in the car and continue to play with the iPad. This was no brainer for her since it meant she could avoid the hustle of being delayed by the child inside the store. Moreover, the weather that day had been relatively cool so there was no risk of leaving her boy to suffer from overheating.

She then locked the car and rushed into the store hoping to be out in just a few minutes. In the store, she bought her some headphones which she expected would help entertain him during their flight later on so that she could focus her energy more on the baby. But the cashier at the store attended to her rather slowly just to add on to her pressure.

Meanwhile, her son was so engrossed in playing on the iPad that he barely noticed that his mother had left him. She returned to find him unbothered. She just hopped into the car and drove off.

Later that evening, after she arrived in Chicago, she received a message from the Richmond informing her that her son had been seen to be seemingly abandoned in the car. A concerned individual took a video of this observation, reported the incident along with her car registration number after she drove off from the store.

She was charged with neglect or exposing her minor to harm through abandoning him. How could she be accused of neglect? Surely, this bewildered her beyond comprehension. She had only left her son in the car for around five minutes and rushed in for quick shopping. Now, she had to find a lawyer, travel back to Virginia and self-report for arrest.

Even though she only got a punishment of 100 hours of community service, she had experienced a lot of emotional devastation at this point and would continue to do so for quite a while.

She felt ashamed from the hostile reactions to her case

After the incident, Brooks suffered an experience of mixed feelings. She was obviously surprised by the charges. In addition to this, she began to feel ashamed about the judgment she received from others.

Even though she felt ashamed, she did not understand why. She could not understand what threat she had exposed her son to. According to the charges from the police, she had left her son alone and vulnerable so she had exposed her son to a threat of being abducted. To her, this seemed absolutely outrageous.

She was aware that this threat was completely absurd. Especially compared to the more imminent threats that children face every day. It is more likely that she had exposed her child to the threat of speeding cars, falling off from a building or even drowning in an unmanned swimming pool than for her son to be kidnapped from a locked car in a Target store parking lot.

Cases of kidnappings for children had been at an all-time low. In fact, when observed as cases of missing persons, 96% of child missing persons were actually runaways and not even her son's age. Only 0.1% of the cases were actual kidnappings.

In addition, the opinion that people held on her case seemed to compound to her misery. When she confided to her close friend, Tracy, she realized that Tracy seemed to be uncomfortable with what she had done.

According to her friend, it was clearly a bad choice that she had left her child in the car. You just never know what could happen. There are really bad people out there in this world.

A few years later, she shared narration of her story with some parents on the website Salon. She wanted to find out what their take was on the issue. She came to realize that their reactions were quite varied. However, many agreed that parenting in this day and age causes one to be on constant lookout for threats to ones' child.

Some of the reactions she got were actually quite vulgar and judgemental. Some were of the opinion that she had done such a terrible thing and they were happy that the cops were called on her. They even questioned why she had wanted to become a parent in the first place if she was not prepared to take the responsibilities that come with it.

Despite the fact that she did not harm her child and that she had not even intended to, she received some really harsh reactions. It became evident to her that parental fears are not necessarily rationally based on the risk involved.

Since the attitude towards bearing children has changed, parenting has become overcautious

It is clear that parenting attitudes have changed over the generations. Brooks claims that when you talk to your grandparents, you realize that their stories of childhood and parenting experiences would be totally incomprehensible today. According to the older generations, there are certain things which were a key aspect of their childhood which are just not seen in the same light in this day and age.

She narrates how her father used to be sent to the store at the age of eight or nine in Utica New York. He would be sent for a few household items such as bread and milk. He would be very proud of himself when he would return with all the items together with the correct change. Today, this sense of active communal responsibility is not seen as a necessary thing for a child to have.

This begs the question - how did this act of giving a sense of independence and freedom to children become a source of fear for modern day parents? In the past, only 100 years ago,

having children was seen as an economic necessity. It was also in a way, an obligation to society. In contrast, having children is now seen as a choice.

Since having children has become a more carefully thought out process, it becomes evident that parents try to ensure that they get every decision about their parenting actions right. The rationale today is that when you decide to have a child, you are basically deciding if you would like to take on a new responsibility.

Since there is little or no pressure to have a child, you are expected to take absolute responsibility for it when you voluntarily decide to. This makes parenting to become an anxious decision-making process.

Even though there are more working mothers in America today, it is interesting to know that mothers spend more time with their children today than they did in the past.

Brooks' parents barely saw her during her childhood. By contrast, her parenting has been like a mini CEO experience. She finds herself doing something, either arranging a playdate or applying for some program and what not. There is always something to do.

Given the fact that parenting is now seen as a choice, it means that there is now more pressure on parents to get everything right hence childhoods are now a lot less free. Instead, they are characterized by excessive supervision.

Fears of parents are often misplaced

Child abductions happen quite rarely. Statistically speaking, a child left alone in a public space in America will be abducted once in every 750000 years. Brooks got a better understanding of this among other child risks when she met Lenore Skenazy who is a blogger, a mother, and founder of the Free Range Kids.

Skenazy tries to fight the notion that children are always in danger. In fact, she believes that it was more dangerous to drive her child on the road in her car than it was to leave him inside the car as she did. In the United States, 3 children died while 487 others got injured from car accidents 2015 alone. If anything, this is way more risky for children than being left alone for a while in a car.

The reason why such minimal risks like kidnappings are more powerful is because of a phenomenon called the availability heuristic. This is where a person is more likely to judge

the likelihood of something happening only by the recollection of an example instead of rational thought.

In the age of hunters and gatherers, this would be particularly handy. If you saw your fellow hunter being eaten by some animal, say a lion in a particular scenario, you would naturally want to avoid being in that scenario just to be safe. Not because there will surely be a lion that would endanger you.

This instinct has remained prevalent in our day to day decision making and it affects us especially when we are interested in making a rational decision.

When we look at the history of kidnappings in America, we find that fears of abduction reached their highest levels in the 80s. The abduction of the six-year-old Adam Walsh in 1981 haunts the memory of many people especially the image of his severed head which was found later on in the drainage canal.

A study showed that between 1986 and 1987, there had been reports of kidnappings or missing persons stories once a week on average in popular magazines. These stories instilled a lot of fear in parents ever since. It reached its peak in 1986. Kidnapping started to appear even more dangerous than choking on tiny objects or even nuclear war and the spread of AIDS.

To justify our moral judgments of other parents, we tend to fabricate fear about their actions

One of Brooks' friends claimed that he would probably try to always keep his child under his supervision. However, he would not do this because he is fearful that the child will be in danger rather he is worried that he might be seen and judged if he didn't. It may be possible that parents fear more about being judged as being terrible parents than they do about rationally observing a risk to their child.

From this, is it possible to consider that the parental fears are really just a pretense? Barbara W. Sarnecka of the University of California, Irvine seems to agree. Sarnecka conducted an experience where participants are required to determine morality and risk associated with the scenarios that were presented where parents leave their child for a while.

One case involved a baby sleeping alone in a car in an underground parking lot. Another had an eight-year left alone old at Starbucks for a while with her mother only a block away.

What was interesting about the findings is that the participants' judgment on morality was based on why the parent was away. For example, a parent having an affair was judged more harshly than one working or unconscious.

But the more interesting thing here is that people were determining risk based on morality. For example, if a child is left alone in a car - it was judged to be riskier if the parent was meeting a lover than if the parent was unconscious. Sarnecka then concluded that moral judgment came first, and their assessment of risk followed accordingly. It seemed that moral judgment is what led people to decide whether a scenario was risky or not.

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology at Yale University also claims that after someone makes a claim that a certain action is immoral, they need a compelling reason to back up their claim. Therefore, they may sometimes fabricate scenarios in support of their claims such as claiming that the immoral act causes danger to us directly.

For example, when a politician claims that Mexicans are dangerous, in order to be compelling enough, he has to come out and back it up by explaining that they have been involved in numerous rape and murder cases and because of this, they are a danger to the country.

Most of us are guilty of such fallacies. We often make mistakes in assessing the risks involved when we criticize parents. We find ourselves judging quickly that someone is a bad father or mother. But perhaps the opposite could be the case.

The poorer a parent you are the more likely you are to be judged by society

Upon listening to other cases of parents being arrested for similar reasons as her, she found that the poorer you are as a parent the more you get judged. Some are quick to label someone to be a bad parent for rather minute reasons. What they do not realize is that as adults, parents are faced with responsibilities that stretch beyond their children on a daily basis.

The poorer the parent, the more the outdoor hustle becomes. One may not always spend time with their children, taking them to the park or music and sports training sessions on a

regular basis. This does not mean that they do not love their children or that they do not want to take responsibility for them.

A case in point is that of Debra Harrell from North Augusta, Georgia. She was working at a McDonald's in the summer of 2014. Her nine-year-old daughter was on school holiday at the time.

Given that she could not afford daycare for her, she lets her go to play in the park. She had deemed it to be a safe neighborhood thus expected her daughter would be safe. After all, the park was full of people familiar to her and her daughter. Moreover, she had given her daughter a cell phone for emergencies. In the park, a stranger takes notice of her daughter playing happily alone while she was at work.

Like Brooks, she was charged with abandonment because her daughter was playing in the park without supervision. When she got to the station, she was denied seeing her daughter. They wanted to send her to a foster home.

Harrell was subjected to judgment. She was lectured by policemen as one who had wanted to abscond her parental duties. She was kept in jail for one day. As if this was not enough misery, she was kept from seeing her daughter for two weeks. For those two weeks, she just slept in her daughter's bed crying.

Luckily, her interrogation tape caused a public outcry for her case. She received pro bono legal support due to this and her case was eventually dismissed. However, her daughter is still scared to go outside on her own until today.

While the government does not provide subsidized child care or mandatory parental leave, universal early years education or parental rights for flexibility in the workplace, it has made it illegal to take your eyes off your child for only a short while.

The freedom of children to learn how to be adults is restricted by their overcautious parents

Parenting has become a difficult task. Meanwhile, childhood experiences have become far less thrilling and free. Today, people above their forties can be found to be more nostalgic about the freedom stories of their childhood when narrating their childhood experiences.

Nowadays, children are more likely to be found doing some supervised training session as part of outdoor activities. In contrast, children were a lot more at ease in outdoor activities. They only needed to step outside, gather with their mates and take part in a game of their choice. A friend of Brooks tells a story of how in his childhood in the seventies, he enjoyed putting on his glove to play baseball with his friends freely until dinner time.

According to Steven Mintz from the University of Texas, unstructured and outdoor play for kids reduced by close to 40% between 1980 and 1990. He claims that as opposed to the free engagement, kids now have to go through organized activities of play dates and focused training in sports lessons. How does this lack of freedom affect the children?

An obvious one is that of obesity. Since children are less free to go outside on their own and just roam about, they are exposed to less activity hence leading to the possible risk of being overweight. What used to be referred to as adult diabetes is now also applicable to children, now known as type 2 diabetes because children are vulnerable to it as well.

Studies by the Centers for Disease show that if the current trends persist, by 2050, one-third of adults could be a victim of diabetes. By contrast, a child far more likely to be such a victim than to be a victim of an abduction. However, unlike abduction, the risk of diabetes is less eye-catching.

The other risk brought about by controlling children's activities is that it derails their mental development. Studies show that that overparenting and poor mental health may be related. One study done in 2013 published in the Journal of Child and Family Studies helps prove this case beyond doubt.

The study was carried out on 300 college participants. It showed that children with more overprotective parents suffered lower satisfaction in their lives and exhibited higher levels of depression.

Small Animals: Parenthood in the Age of Fear by Kim

Brooks Book Review

It is clear that parenting has become quite complicated. At least moral expectations of parenting have changed a lot, to say the least. Today, most parents are not only too cautious about their children's' lives, but they are also actually cautious about the wrong things.

Because of the unnecessary fear that parents are having, they are giving more attention to things that are not deserving. As a result, more important but less subtle issues are likely to be ignored. Even worse for the children is that they are denied some basic freedoms which are crucial to their development. This, in turn, causes children to experience physical and mental problems at some stage in their lives.

<https://goodbooksummary.com/small-animals-by-kim-brooks-book-summary/>