



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on July 12, 2024

Overly Cautious or Overly Crazy?

“Soooooo, it happened. The police were called because my 8 year old was riding her bike on our street.”

That’s the email I got from Kay Eskridge, a Kentucky mom, former Child Protective Services worker, and fan of the Free-Range Kids movement. Over the years, she’s written to me several times about our shared passion for childhood independence. But this time, it was personal.

When her note arrived in late May, I asked if she wanted to talk about it. She wasn’t ready yet. But when we connected through Zoom last week, Kay was more than ready. She was mad. So, she set the scene:



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Thanks to a weird schedule, Kay’s daughter Julia gets home two hours before her friends. That leaves her bored and eager for fun by late afternoon. When at last her buddy got home on May 18, Julia hopped on her bike to ride the eight houses over to his place. “She was three houses away,” says Kay, “and the police stopped her.”

The officer was actually someone the family knew. (Kay’s husband is in local politics.) He told the girl, “This isn’t a good time to be outside,” reports Kay. “Julia said, ‘I’m used to traffic! I know how to ride.’ And he was like — ‘Oh. OK.’”

He let the girl continue, but then he turned around and came to Kay’s house. “Can a child not ride her bike on the street in this neighborhood anymore? Is that what we’re saying?” she asked the cop.

He replied it wasn’t that. It’s just that a woman had called the police “upset that a child was outside.”

But being outside is not illegal, Kay responded. And it’s not dangerous! “Why do we have you and your cops in our neighborhood and pay high taxes for y’all if we don’t live in a safe place?” she asked.

The cop said that at 5 o’clock, there’s traffic. “Traffic,” Kay said to me, rolling her eyes.

When Julia got home, she told her mom a woman had come running out to her. Kay realized that must have been the neighbor, an older lady down the block, who called the cops, so Kay went to talk to her.

“Was Julia being unsafe in the road? Was she zig-zagging through cars?” she asked the neighbor. “And she said, ‘Well, she’s just a little girl out there.’”

Kay saw the woman getting emotional and knew she had suffered a personal loss. So Kate dialed things down. She talked about how kids need some independence, and she’s raising her daughter to be confident. “I explained how she’s not on screens when she comes home.” The woman, a former teacher, eventually agreed that Kay’s parenting decisions sounded good. They parted on friendly terms.

But now Kay would like the rest of the world’s Samaritans to press pause, because this was not Julia’s first encounter with overly concerned adults. “She’s been stopped so many times by people,” Kay says.



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“I’ve been called because she was climbing a tree at the park. I said, ‘I hope she’s climbing a tree!’”

Kay also hopes Julia can take all this in stride, because her daughter is so happy and proud “getting to be independent.”

What’s more, Julia’s independence is inspiring the other kids. One of Julia’s friends, a boy who’s also 8, is never allowed outside and doesn’t yet know how to ride a bike. Kay says, “He told me himself. ‘I’m only allowed independence in the VR headset world.’”

Her daughter is gradually getting him to come out and play, even as Kay is getting the mom to loosen the reins.

Overly cautious cops aren’t making it any easier.

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