



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on February 17, 2023

Still Judging Parents, Even When They're Dead

A very long study of about 1,000 adults born in the '50s and '60s looked at how they were raised, and whether that upbringing had an impact on their longevity. The researchers found that folks who'd grown up overprotected were more likely to die before age 80 than, I guess, Free-Range Kids (now Free-Range Geezers).

As reported in [NeuroscienceNews.com](#):

"Men who had an overprotective father and little autonomy during childhood may run a 12% higher risk of dying before their eightieth birthday. In the case of women who had an overprotective father, the risk of dying before the age of 80 can increase by 22%."



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Even though this seems like outright vindication for Free-Range Kids (and me!), I am having a hard time considering this study as anything more than parental-fear fodder, for three reasons.

First: It is really hard to specify what is overprotection, considering we all grow up in different neighborhoods, family situations, etc. — a million variations. And personally, I know that while I am Free-Range in many circumstances, I'm also part-Helicopter on my mom's side.

So, it seems judgmental and even unfair to declare certain practices *ipso facto* overprotective. Yes, Free-Range and Let Grow are dedicated to giving kids MORE INDEPENDENCE. We want a society that trusts kids with more free time and free play.

But that doesn't mean that we condemn parents who, say, won't let their kids go on overnights (a hot issue of late). After all: What if that parent was abused as a kid? What if there's some custody issue going on? What if one parent bows to the other's fears? (Murkier still: the study seems to have asked the participants to recall their childhoods when the participants were already in ripe middle age.)

Second: The study also found that "authoritarianism, permissiveness and negligence can be negative for children's development." At which point, it starts sounding like if you were raised EXACTLY RIGHT — with parents who weren't too attentive but also weren't too un-attentive — you won the longevity lottery. It drives me crazy that there is supposedly some perfect Goldilocks parenting paradigm, or what the researchers praise as "being present and taking care."

How does anyone ever find this sweetest of sweet spots or agree on it? Even COUPLES can't agree on how to raise their kids — dad doesn't want to let 'em quit soccer, mom thinks it's the child's choice. Is dad an authoritarian jerk? Or is he "taking care" to develop the child's grit? Is mom pathetically permissive? Or is she "being present" and respecting the child's interests?

Finally: By the time a person lives to 80, the parent who did or did not do that perfect child-rearing is likely to be watching from somewhere other than the den, if you catch my drift. So even if giving our kids an extra hour of playtime a week meant they'll live till 95, it's hard for most parents to think, "Well,



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I don't have that extra hour right now, but I'll be kicking myself in 87 years..."

Our parenting decisions have got to be based on something other than what is optimal according to scientific studies.

What research like this really proves is that there's nothing parents can do that can't be second-guessed, even decades after they are moldering in the grave. All that pressure is making it ever harder to be a parent — which could (God forbid!) lead to authoritarianism, permissiveness or neglect.

Advice from this gal who tries to buck the overprotection trend, but certainly is no paragon of parenting perfection? (Alliteration, that's another story.)

Love 'em. Feed 'em. Give them some free time and free play. And go easy on the parenting research.

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