



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on February 3, 2023

## The Dunkin' Donuts Case

It was Super Bowl Sunday in February 2019. Cynthia Rivers and her husband decided that their kids, 7 and 9, deserved a long-promised treat for cleaning their rooms: the chance to walk to Dunkin' Donuts, a mile away, by themselves. (I changed her name to protect the family's anonymity.)

This was in a suburban town in western Connecticut. The kids gathered \$7, and off they went.

A few minutes later, the Rivers heard a knock at the door. It was the police.

The first cop to show up "said he didn't think it was safe for the kids to walk by themselves," said Rivers. "We told him that while we did feel it was safe, we agreed to not allow them to walk around town unsupervised."

"We thought that would have been the end of it," Rivers added, "until three more officers showed up." (I have read the police paperwork, which confirms all this.)

The first cop sent Rivers' husband to retrieve the kids, who had only made it a couple blocks. Then mom, dad and the kids faced a barrage of questions.

"They told us that it wasn't safe for kids to walk down the street ... that drug dealers were going to give them drugs, and that it was 'a different world now.'"

When Rivers said she didn't think that was true, "One of them responded, and I quote, 'Don't you watch the news? I mean, I know it's all fake, but still!' That made my head spin," Rivers said.

Upset, she went back inside. She found out later from her husband that at that point the arresting officer said to him, "If she talks to me again, I'm going to arrest you both and take away your kids."

Rivers' husband was back home quickly after the arrest, and they began searching for a lawyer. But a few days later, a police sergeant visited the house and let the Rivers know that they were dropping the charges. He admitted that the law concerning child negligence was open to interpretation on the question of letting kids walk by themselves. Happily, the Rivers told the lawyer that his services wouldn't be necessary after all because everything was settled.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. The police charges had gone away, but the Department of Children and Families (DCF) pursued its own investigation.

The DCF caseworker visited the family twice and interviewed everyone about their complete history.

"She was looking for problems," says Rivers.

Rivers tried to explain that the police had overreacted, but the caseworker was not moved. When Rivers



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revealed that she had received therapy for depression some years before, the caseworker weaponized this information — and insisted she return to therapy.

Eventually, DCF closed the case, too. While this may seem like a happy ending, it has had a lasting, negative impact. Rivers says she waited three years — until her daughter turned 12 — to finally let her go for another walk with a friend, unsupervised.

That's an extra quarter of the girl's life that was spent without any freedom to enjoy bike rides, walking to the park or getting a doughnut without an adult minder.

Let Grow, the nonprofit I helm, is trying to change the neglect laws so that simply trusting your kids in the outside world is not reason enough to trigger investigations like this. Connecticut is contemplating a "Reasonable Childhood Independence" bill that would establish a clearer bar for neglect: *obvious* danger, rather than *any* danger an imaginative person might think of.

"I've lived in this area most of my life," says Rivers. "I've gone walking and jogging all around this town, by myself, at all hours of the day and night, and met and talked to many local people. I have never felt threatened by a single person in this town until meeting those officers and the social worker."

*Lenore Skenazy is president of Let Grow, a contributing writer at Reason.com, and author of "Has the World Gone Skenazy?" To learn more about Lenore Skenazy (Lskenazy@yahoo.com) and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate webpage at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).*

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