



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on May 31, 2024

## To Get Kids Off Phones, Open the Door!

Sorry — another rant. Or maybe it's more of a revelation. It's this:

Giving kids phones makes possible the impossible demands on parents, that they supervise, assist, drive and chaperone their kids everywhere, every day — usually while holding down another job.

It's only because we can hand kids their electronic devices that we can get this tsunami of stuff, including cooking, commuting, cleaning and maybe even talking to our spouses once in a while, done. Thanks to phones, the kids are quiet.

Without phones, we'd be at our wits' end. They buy us the time we desperately need. That's one big reason phones are so ubiquitous. And why it's so hard to take them away from our kids, even if we think we should.

**BUT!!!** *If* we gave kids back freedom to do things *without* adults always watching them, the whole equation changes.

We would have more free time.

We wouldn't be so frantic.

Kids wouldn't be on their phones as much.

Kids would be happier.

If it were *normal* again to have the kids come home and go play outside, on their own, they'd be out of our hair, interested and engaged like — dare I say it? — we were. They wouldn't need to be on their phones because they'd be outside, busy. Which means *inside* would be quiet. We could get stuff done. We also wouldn't have to drive them to so many activities, because “playing outside” *is* an activity. And it's local and free, so we could actually save some money.

And free play happens to be great for kids! Everyone's so worried about childhood anxiety and depression, including me. But when kids play without an adult “helping,” they automatically get practice at solving problems and making life fun.

**BUT!!!** This just isn't happening much.

Currently, phones are serving the role that “go play outside” used to play: a way for kids to be out of our hair, occupied, without it costing much.

So, to stop kids from spending seven or eight hours a day on their phones, people may *think* we either have to enroll them in a bunch more adult-run activities — and work to *pay* for those activities and *get*



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*them* to and from those activities. Or, instead of outsourcing the activities, it may look like we ourselves would have to abandon everything else on our plate (work, relationships) to engage them in play, despite the fact that this is boring and we are already stretched thin.

But the one cheap, time-tested alternative being ignored is *letting them go outside and make their own fun*. Letting the kids simply hang out with ... other kids. Or a friendly dog. Or a hopefully non-rabid squirrel.

Let us therefore *strive to make unsupervised free play normal again*. Kids are hardwired to love doing it. Parents are hardwired *not* to want to do this nearly as much as kids do. That's why kids have always had a separate world from adults.

Right now, that separate world has become, by default, a screen.

But open the door and say, "be home by supper," and that separate "kids world" becomes the neighborhood. When other parents also start saying, "go play," parenting becomes easier, cheaper and happier. Ditto for childhood. Phones are replaced, at least in part, by kids' favorite thing: *playing with other kids, not us, in real life*.

So, find a local friend also fed up with being their kids' constant playmate, chauffeur, bodyguard and get-off-your-phone nagger, and *both* of you open the door and say, "be home by supper."

And when the kids get a little older, they can make supper, too.

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