Why Parents Should Stop Overprotecting Kids and Let Them Play

An Interview with Hara Estroff Marano and Lenore Skenazy

Hara Estroff Marano and Lenore Skenazy have long observed and chronicled the decline of free play in the United States. Marano, for nearly twenty years an editor at large for *Psychology Today* and formerly its editor in chief, writes feature articles and the magazine's advice column, "Unconventional Wisdom." She has also written about human emotion and behavior for *Smithsonian*, *Marie Claire*, *New York Magazine, Self*, the *New York Times*, and others. Marano is a member of the advisory board of the Bringing Theory to Practice Project, an Association of American Colleges and Universities initiative, which promotes the cognitive, emotional, and civic development of students. She is the author of *Why Doesn't Anybody Like Me? A Guide to Raising Socially Competent Kids* (1998) and *A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting* (2008). Skenazy is a nationally syndicated columnist and former staffer of National Public Radio and *Mad Magazine*. She wrote *Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children* (2010) and created the Free-Range Kids blog. In this dual interview, Marano discusses the faltering resilience of young people, the rise of cautious overparenting, and narcissistic parental expectation; and Skenazy describes how misplaced fear drives American parents to comic lengths in protecting their children against imagined danger. **Key words:** coping skills; free-range play; nation of wimps; outdoor play; parenting styles; parental fears

American Journal of Play: Ms. Marano, a couple of years ago, you said overparenting is making America a nation of wimps. Is America no longer the home of the brave?

Hara Estroff Marano: Sadly, it isn't. The home of the brave has given way to the home of the fearful, the entitled, the risk averse, and the narcissistic. Today's young, at least in the middle class and upper class, are psychologically fragile. Historically, the normal vicissitudes of life, the little lumps and bumps, the challenges, and the daily difficulties have been pebbles over which we have stumbled but on which we have developed our unique coping skills. We have used that experience to develop a sense of mastery and confidence

American Journal of Play, volume 3, number 4. Contact Hara Estroff Marano at hmarano@psychologytoday.com; contact Lenore Skenazy at lskenazy@yahoo.com

that we can cope with whatever life throws our way. Today, I fear for the home of the brave because we are robbing people of the sense that they can cope. Without that, we have no basis for nurturing the moral sentiment of courage. There are a number of benchmarks of its disappearance, but you see it especially in how kids increasingly want certainty. They want to know what's ahead, they want to know the answers in advance, and they want to know exactly what will be covered in their college courses and especially what will be on the tests. Even within the realm of relative certainty of the university experience, they have very little tolerance for uncertainty. I find this need for certainty very disturbing when I think about the kind of character we sum up with "the home of the brave."

AJP: How do you know this about college students?

Marano: First of all, there are year-to-year surveys that document the increasing number of college students who are developing serious problems. These studies show that since the 1990s, there is a consistent pattern of increasingly severe psychological disorders among increasing numbers of college students. The numbers have gone up and up and up. Second, from interviews with several hundred professionals on the frontlines of the campus counseling centers, I have learned that the lack of coping skills is precisely what distinguishes today's college students.

AJP: Do you believe changes in parenting styles have helped cause this?

Marano: Yes. And to illustrate, let me tell you a story that caught my attention. One Sunday morning I was out for a run, and I took a different route home past the playground where my own kids used to play. At first I was thrilled to see so many fathers with their kids, but then I did a double take because the fathers weren't letting the kids play. For every child, there was a dad standing there coaching every move—moving the kids' arms, catching them as they came down the tiny slide, doing virtually everything for them. When my kids were young, we parents sat around the perimeter, let the kids play, and didn't get involved unless someone had a bloody nose or something like it.

AJP: Are there any benefits to this growing fear that parents have for their kids?

Marano: You know how fear galvanizes attention, how it narrows your frame of reference and your concerns? Well, guess who benefits from that? Advertisers, among others, benefit from fear. They generate it, and they reap the rewards of it. Nothing sells like fear. And if you look at most products advertised for kids—or for anybody—they appeal either to status or to

anxiety. In fact, advertisements that appeal to status also appeal to anxiety because they play on individuals' concerns for social standing.

AJP: How do you see advertisers playing to the concerns of parents?

Marano: Advertisers know that today's parents want perfection for their kids in the form of perfectly controlled environments. Advertisers play to that desire, and in doing so they also ramp up fear by creating problems that don't really exist but are in line with what parents worry about. Then the advertisers sell the solutions. One example I love is shopping cart liners. These are soft, quilted pads, shaped like seats. You place one in your shopping cart so your precious little one doesn't come in direct contact with—heaven forbid—a surface that others have touched before. Why on earth do you need to be afraid that shopping carts will sicken your kids? Shopping carts have not been identified as major vectors of disease, yet manufacturers of these things, these pads, have persuaded millions of mothers that they are not doing their best job as parents unless they protect their kids from the possibility of germs and discomfort lurking in shopping carts.

AJP: Does this type of thing influence how parents allow children to play?

Marano: Yes. Parents begin to think there are dangers lurking everywhere. If shopping carts are filthy and shouldn't be touched, imagine what parents eventually conclude about children playing outside in the dirt? "Yuck," they say. "That's not suitable for my child." And so that, in turn, has direct consequences for outdoor play. Parents begin to feel the need to protect their kids from almost everything. It's only a short psychological leap from fear of dirty shopping carts to fear of sexual predators lurking everywhere—dangers that just don't exist to anywhere near the degree that parents imagine. These are not merely dangers that don't exist; these are highly counterproductive beliefs.

AJP: What are the consequences of this growing fear?

Marano: Parental restrictions on outdoor play are now seen as having considerable consequences for children's health and future well-being. One is the obesity epidemic. Kids need to play outdoors where they have space to explore and run around. Also, playing in the dirt seems to strengthen the immune system; dirt contains beneficial microorganisms that stimulate the body's defenses. If you restrict outdoor play, you also restrict stimulation of the immune system. The system then responds inappropriately to stimuli, and that likely explains the rise in allergies, asthma, and autoimmune disorders. So that's number two. Third, without free outdoor play, kids lack

the ability to gather and play spontaneously, and that in turn causes a serious lack of social skills. Gathering and playing freely with others lets kids practice many aspects of democracy, and when free play is denied, so are those opportunities.

Appealing to parental fears is rampant in the entire culture. At this moment in the United States, we are playing to human weaknesses and human vulnerabilities, not to strengths. We are not promoting strengths, not celebrating character development. We act as if children are born weak and can't do a thing without direct parental intervention. There are now classes for teaching your children how to walk! Imagine having to teach healthy children how to walk! Actually, all the falling down kids do in the course of learning to walk, all the attempting to stand up, all the crawling, all the plopping down and pulling themselves up—all the natural strategies they develop—build the critical musculature and coordination that children need for walking.

AJP: Do you see this type of parental fear as something new in our country?

Marano: Yes, I do. In stark contrast to the highly optimistic 1960s, there is a very grim view of human nature—a very deep pessimism—at large today, and it's widespread and visible in many areas. There is serious distrust of childhood and its natural course. People distrust children's natural curiosity, and they don't believe children are competent. There is also widespread distrust of most institutions, governments, and even the neighbors.

AJP: Do efforts to control risk make our culture more secure?

Marano: They do not, and the interesting and somewhat complex reason is tied up with the growth in affluence. Affluence gives us the illusion that we have control. And because we expect to control our circumstances, dangers and uncertainties seem ever more dangerous. By this psychological sleight, ordinary risks seem more dangerous than they once did. The attempt to eliminate risk is not only a fool's goal and enormously presumptuous, it completely misrepresents the nature of life. Risk is an inherent part of life. Success and happiness hinge not on the elimination of risk but on the reasonable management of risk.

AJP: So how should people judge and measure risk?

Marano: Judging risk requires the application, first, of common sense and then some calculation of risk versus benefit. It is a fact of life that all movement entails some risk. Some risk is pretty immediate. If you're running on the hard surface of a playground or a street, you might fall and break your arm.

But the risk of no movement can be much greater, although it plays out over a vastly longer period of time—say, the development of cardiovascular disease forty-five years down the road. Is it risky for a child to cross a street? Well, yes, to some degree it is—and for an adult too. But it is much less risky if you believe in the capacity of children to learn and you teach them some basic safety principles. However, some parents have opted instead to eliminate the risk entirely by forbidding their children to cross any streets. At a certain point, that is disabling and distrustful of children's ability to learn. It not only restricts children's movements beyond the reasonable, it breeds fearfulness in the child.

AJP: Ms. Skenazy, in your syndicated newspaper column, you often call for parents to raise "free-range kids," as you call them. What do you mean by that term, and are you attempting to break the grip of fear?

L**enore Skenazy:** Yes, I am. I would like to see kids playing more. My kids play less than I did, and I wasn't even big on the outdoors. Many times when my kids look outside, there is no one out there to play with, so they stay inside. And that sort of creates this vicious cycle of every child being indoors and texting, playing on a computer, or watching TV. Going outside and expecting to see another kid and saying, "Look, I got a ball, let's go to the park," is gone. So when I say let's raise free-range kids, I mean I want to see more kids going the park with a ball. That's free range. It's basically growing up similar to the way most parents today were raised in times that were actually more dangerous than today. Everyone believes the crime rate was lower in the 1970s and 1980s than it is now, so we don't send our kids outside. But, actually, the opposite is true. Crime was higher when we parents were kids than it is now.

AJP: Do your readers share your views, and do they share theirs with you?

Skenazy: Yes, a lot. One lady recently shared this story about sending her eight-year-old son to the park. He got hungry and thirsty, so he went to the local chicken place to get a glass of water, and while he was there some guy said, "Oh, are you hungry too?" The boy said, "Sure," and the man gave him some food and then called the police. They came and called the mother, and when she came, they told her, "We could arrest you for this." She said "No, you couldn't. There's no law against this." They said, "It's up to us. Let's go see where you live." She had to take them home and convince them that she wasn't raising her eight-year-old in a negligent manner. They let her off, but they said, "Don't do it again." She asked them, "How

old do you think he should be before he can go to play in the park, a park that's there for children to play in?" The police said, "Thirteen or fourteen." How do you change the culture when even those who have the keys to the jail think that a normal childhood—or what I would consider a normal childhood—is dangerous, and possibly illegal? That's my big worry of the day. Some reasonable people, a panel of experts, need to make a definitive, specific statement about what is age appropriate: Seven-years-old is an okay age for your kid to stay at home alone for a couple of hours. Eight-years-old is a safe age to go to the park alone provided that the neighborhood that isn't riddled by sniper fire. Ten years is an okay age to start babysitting. Two hundred years earlier a kid that age would have been apprenticed for two years already!

AJP: You have been outspoken about Halloween. What has happened to that popular and, for the most part, kids' holiday?

Skenazy: The *Today* show recently recommended that no child go trick-or-treating without a parental escort until age thirteen, and the producers' reasoning was that there are scary people out there doing bad things. So, I looked up Elizabeth Letourneau, at the Medical University of South Carolina, who had tallied the number of children molested on Halloween by sex offenders from 1997 to 2005. She found no difference between the number of incidents in those years when there weren't any laws that prohibited registered sex offenders from leaving their homes on Halloween and the present when there are many laws like that. Not only did she find no difference, but Halloween turns out to be especially safe! Letourneau said that after looking at sixty-seven thousand crime reports over the course of those eight years, she and her fellow researchers considered calling Halloween the safest day of the year. Why is it safe? Because people are outside! But the fear monitors would have everyone staying inside, too terrified to let their children out.

AJP: How do you feel about indoor Halloween parties?

Skenazy: When parents bring Halloween inside, it's supervised. It's parent created, parent run, probably parent cleaned-up. To children, it's like another class in school, except you happen to bob for apples somewhere in the middle of it. And the idea that you have to inspect all your children's candy makes it seem as if your neighbors, who had seemed pretty nice, are really probably child killers, and that idea takes hold in your brain, and then it spreads. Halloween is where we test-market our parental fears, and if they

fly, then we can go with them for the rest of the year. If you think your neighbors are quite possibly psychopaths who like killing children on Halloween, well then, chances are they are psychopaths during the rest of the year, too, and so let's just not trust them at all. Bring the children inside and supervise their every move because if you're living near a psychopath, you don't want your kids playing in the front yard.

AJP: How can we allow children to range freely while still protecting them from realistic dangers? For instance, should children be left to deal with bullies themselves?

Marano: Fifteen years ago, when I wrote a cover story about bullying for *Psychology Today* and then a book about the subject, *Why Doesn't Anybody Like Me? A Guide to Raising Socially Confident Kids*, no one gave a damn about bullying. But as the fear culture has escalated, bullying has taken on significance, and its definition has changed and enlarged. I can judge simply by the volume of emails I now get on the topic.

AJP: Do adults tend to misinterpret some types of play as bullying?

Marano: Oh yes. It's important to recognize that what people interpret as bullying is totally ridiculous. If one child says to another "you can't play with us," that's often seen by parents as bullying. It's not pleasant, true. Social rejection by peers is always painful. But it's not bullying. Saying something negative to another child is frequently seen as bullying, when it is often merely a basic element of social exchange. Sometimes, for example, the answer to the question "can I play with you today?" is "no." It does not involve the intent to harm. It is often the result of a group of children wishing to continue the play situation they are currently enjoying. Period. They don't want to go outside the frame at that moment. And the next day the answer to the question "can I play with you?" might be "we're playing house and we already have a mommy and a daddy but you can be the doggie." Bullying is actually the consistent misuse of power against someone who is younger or weaker with the explicit intent to harm. Sometimes bad things happen, or sometimes someone says something negative to another kid, but every "no" is not bullying. Telling a child that he or she can't play may reflect a whole variety of totally benign situations. The kids at play may feel they already have enough participants in whatever they are doing. They may be in the middle of some actions that are best not interrupted. They may be getting along so well they don't, for the time being, want or need any extraneous members. Of course, tomorrow is another day.

AJP: What about teasing? Is teasing bullying?

Marano: In general, teasing, which is a very sophisticated activity and a cognitive high-wire act, is not bullying. But some people think all teasing is terrorizing. Teasing is usually a playful and deliberately ambiguous activity meant to stimulate a response. Let's not confuse it with cruelty, which is something else.

AJP: Should we lower our standard for what is regarded as bullying?

Marano: Bullying is a real problem. It has always been a real problem. It will continue to be a real problem. There are always going to be a number of kids who have learned it can be a workable social strategy. To some degree, kids can be fortified against being the victim of bullying, and institutions can be run in ways to minimize its existence. But we should stop exaggerating and bully mongering. I get emails consistently telling me that 40 percent of kids are now bullies. This is another one of those exaggerations of real danger. It's misinformation they get off the Internet. Hyping the dangers of bullying and seeing it in every negative interaction is a mistake that reflects the general mistrust of childhood and the misunderstanding of the social experiences of children.

AJP: How does playing help children learn how to deal with bullies?

Marano: This is crucial. By playing regularly with other kids—playing freely—kids gain social skills that become a natural deterrent to bullying. They learn how to handle disruptions. They learn how to negotiate disputes. They learn how to dispel problems. They learn how to detect and even avoid those kids who tend to create difficulties. This is very adaptive behavior. They learn how to ask to join others already engaged in activity, which again, takes a lot of observation and cognitive sophistication. And they learn how to be assertive (which is by no means the same thing as being aggressive), which is the single best defense against bullying. Depriving children of opportunities to play keeps them from developing their natural defenses against bullying, the lack of which is what—in the long run—encourages bullying by that small percentage of kids who think it's a good strategy for getting what they want. The more kids lack social skills, the more likely they are preyed upon by bullies. After all, bullies don't pick on just anyone. They carefully target the weaker kids, those who don't know how to get along with and are not liked by other kids. Studies show that bullies prefer to pick on kids who are not assertive and who never stand up for themselves—even in situations not related to bullying.

AJP: So is free play an antidote to bullying?

Marano: Most kids have built-in, internal restraints against bullying, or, at least, they used to—when kids were allowed to play with each other and develop social skills and when normal abilities to adjudicate disputes would come into play and be sharpened by playing. Lack of play is creating many of the conditions that allow bullies to exist. When you curtail play in kids' lives, they miss the opportunity to develop many skills. They don't learn how to be assertive, how to stand up for themselves; that alone targets them for bullying. In the normal course of childhood, most kids become mostly bully-proof. But these days they are deprived of the situations that fortify them. They have fewer skills to ward off bullies. That encourages bullies and fosters bullying. Remember, bullies are made and not born. They lack the restraints against hurting others that most children acquire when young. They fail to develop empathy both from their lack of play and from other experiences such as inconsistent parental approaches to discipline.

AJP: Can adults intervene to stop bullying?

Marano: The growing deficit of social skills among the young shifts the burden onto adults to monitor for bullies. Most often that burden falls on teachers. For a variety of reasons, that's an extremely imperfect system. Study after study shows that teachers often don't recognize bullying even when it happens right under their noses. Further, bullies are very canny about committing their transgressions when the adults' backs are turned.

AJP: What are your thoughts about cyberbullying? How can parents help kids deal with this new form of bullying?

Marano: Cyberbullying may be a special case because often the bully is unknown. It could be a kid, a large group of kids, or an adult. Sometimes adults get so overidentified with their children that they take up their children's causes in extraordinarily negative ways. The cyberbullied kid is outflanked in power and needs some help and guidance in how to deal with that. There are solutions that kids can't see, and parents can help out by suggesting ways of dealing with it. Having a life that's balanced—with time for social play—and not living one's whole life online lessens the opportunity for cyberbullying to develop. That said, it isn't clear to what extent cyberbullying exists. There's some evidence it is chiefly an anxious manifestation of parental ignorance of the Internet and about their kids' use of it. In any case, part of the parental job description is giving kids the tools they need for living independently. It's a parent's job to see that a child knows how

to use the Internet responsibly. This is something parents have to discuss with their kids. Parents can't just buy software that monitors every keystroke of their child; that is about the most mistrustful thing a parent can do. Parents need to teach kids skills for using the Internet responsibly, just as they teach kids skills for driving a car responsibly.

AJP: Do electronic games deprive kids of free play?

Marano: No, we can't blame deprivation of free play on electronic games. Children spend too much time inside largely because parents are worried about dangers outside. When kids are inside, parents know where they are and often actively or passively encourage them to play video games or otherwise engage with technology. Significantly, the instruments of technology kids use these days are compelling in ways that make them virtually addictive. They have tremendous built-in appeal with immediate and constant feedback. They become extremely reinforcing. There is nothing inherently wrong with playing these games or engaging in such activities as texting. But they require the exercise of willpower—an executive function—to put aside, and kids lack executive control—in part, because they have never been allowed to develop it, but also, in part, because they are still young.

There is nothing inherently wrong with electronic games, but there needs to be some balance in their use. They can't be the only things to fill kids' time. Parents need to put boundaries on the use of such playthings and instruments because kids can't. Isn't that, after all, one of the functions of parents? They need to balance the toys of technology with the more classic and active kinds of play experiences of childhood. Because there are still only twenty-four hours in a day, parents can say, "For every hour you spend indoors you need to spend an hour outside."

AJP: So encouraging electronic game play can be another form of risk avoidance?

Marano: Yes. Think back to what we said about Halloween and distrust. When fear grows, distrust becomes generalized, and the urge to supervise your children's every move grows. Distrust makes parents want a cell phone with GPS to monitor their kids, and then that becomes a tether, and that leads to overmanagement. Distrust causes twenty-one parents to walk eighteen kids to the bus stop right past every neighbor's house. You don't allow your neighbor to walk your kids to school along with their own kids because you can't trust the neighbor. So you do it yourself.

Let me give you an example of a clear misapprehension of risk. This is a true story of a mother in Birmingham, Michigan, who decided that

it was less risky to drive her son eight hundred miles to a campground in Minnesota for a class trip than it was to let him fly with his peers. The car trip, mile for mile, person for person, and conveyance for conveyance, was far more risky than the plane ride. But what's most important is that the mother deprived her son of the shared experience and the opportunity for a modest degree of independence that traveling parentless would have allowed. The misconception of risk allowed the mother to have personal, direct control instead of ceding control to a pilot or to the weather, so she felt like she lessened risk by her constant supervision and intervention. Of course, that is totally an illusion. It's also a delusion.

Skenazy: One of the reasons we're so confused is that some parents don't distinguish between a one-in-ten risk and a one-in-a-million risk. You hear parents say things like, "Even if there is a one-in-five-billion chance that my kid will be hurt, that's a risk I don't want to take." One of the reasons that we think this way is that we are constantly told that things are risky when they decidedly are not. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggested that hot dogs should carry choking warnings because every year a couple of children choke on them. That happens because that's the main thing that children eat, not because the hot dog itself is so incredibly dangerous.

AJP: So how do parents put risks associated with play into perspective?

M**arano**: There is a point at which we have to apply some judgment and some common sense. We need to kind of rebalance and recalibrate our brains and remove a lot of what's been foisted on us by the media and special interests. We need to analyze for ourselves. Every parent comes upon issues for which the way things are supposed to work isn't working for their particular kids. When this happens, you've got to think your way through it. You have to say, wait, the rules aren't working for us, or our household, or the way we like to do things. You have to analyze it and find another way to make things work. It's psychologically and mentally taxing, but it's something everyone must do. And you have to keep on doing it because kids are always developing and changing, and what worked yesterday doesn't necessarily work tomorrow. You have to strip away a lot of the outside value judgments, including fear, and apply your own judgment about what is needed for you, for your kid, for your family.

Parenting requires parents to make constant assessments of their children's readiness for new challenges and the next stage of growth along many dimensions—physical, emotional, cognitive, and social. You can't

just say playgrounds with moving parts are too dangerous and that's that. In reality, a merry-go-round is not something for a two-year-old to jump on and off of, but it's perfectly suitable for a six- or seven-year-old. Riding a scooter is too risky for a two-year-old, but a five-year-old loves it and can develop a certain agility doing it. And that agility prepares him or her for even greater degrees of movement. With children, you can't make one decision about what's risky and expect it to apply at all times.

AJP: How can parents keep appropriate distance and still help kids come up with ideas for play?

Skenazy: My kids are really bad at coming up with something to do on their own. And part of the reason is that they rarely have opportunities to try. If they participate in an after-school activity like soccer, the coach organizes it: "Now it's time to run; now it's time to kick; now it's time for your organic snack." And so they associate play with something that's compulsory, almost like school. It's like a class where the activities are dictated, and the kids follow orders, and then they're done. It thrills me, almost pathetically, when I hear that my son was outside during lunch and he and his friends played a game they created on their own. Once, he and his cousins created a game called Seven Square instead Four Square so that everyone could play, and it was a highlight of my life and his, because the kids had actually done something that I think kids in earlier generations did regularly, which is making their own fun.

Marano: Oversupervised kids become unable to think of anything to do on their own. Boredom becomes a state from which they expect someone or something—a computer game, tunes on their iPod, or some handheld device—to relieve them. Under normal conditions, boredom is a perfectly natural aversive state, meant to stimulate you to find something to do that is interesting, something that clicks with you and excites a growing curiosity. Now, however, you need only to default to your handheld to pass time.

AJP: So what can parents do?

Marano: Sadly, we've arrived at the point where opportunity for play has to be carved out artificially. Parents have to facilitate it for it to happen at all, and by that I don't mean coaching every move like the dads in the park I mentioned earlier. Of course, parents have always been social architects for their children in many ways—like choosing to live in neighborhoods filled with children—but we've not been in a situation before where children actually had to be encouraged to play. There are parents who have caught

on that something is missing, and they want to encourage play. What they should do is get a group of parents and children together, whether it's the next door neighbors or people from the next town. Then they literally need to mark off a space in which it's okay for kids to play—away from parental oversight. The parents can stay indoors and encourage the kids to go outside. The parents may have to put some novel equipment outdoors or otherwise help the kids get started, but then they need to leave the kids alone. There's a great irony here: outdoor play may take some parental engineering—exactly what there is too much of in children's lives these days, among the middle and upper classes—to make room and opportunity for play and to stimulate it among kids.

AJP: We have talked about how free play outdoors helps kids develop social skills. What else are children missing when they don't play freely outdoors?

Marano: They become risk averse and excessively cautious. And this spills over into a deficit of what's called *divergent thinking*, or the ability to solve problems. Innovation is based on playful, divergent thinking, and we depend upon it to create jobs. Recent studies have tracked an accelerating decline in kids' creativity—and by creativity I don't mean drawing and painting but their ability to solve problems. We know there's no one single cause, but the researchers believe that a lack of play has figured significantly into it. The decline in play, of course, coincides with an increase in parents' monitoring, directing and managing their children. Instead of playing, kids are performing tasks their parents and schools have designated as needed for achievement. One interesting finding is that creativity measures in childhood are three times more likely to predict lifetime accomplishment than is childhood IQ. By the way, creativity scores of youngsters were rising until the 1990s, when they began falling. That squares with the changes seen in parenting, play, and pushing children to achieve in ways that are designated by parents and that enhance parental status.

It seems to me that parents don't necessarily want their kids to learn; learning is irrelevant to what they want. They want their kids to perform well on tasks and tests in school. It's like a parlor trick. They want compliant kids to achieve in order to get into brand-name colleges, which, given our uncertain times, is considered the best measure of an adult's parenting ability and is somehow thought to be the best assurance that a child will replicate the parents' social status. This is what kills play; parents think it's a waste of time on the path to achievement in the classroom or on the

soccer field. So play gets sacrificed. Play isn't directed toward goals, and today's parents are highly goal directed when it comes to their children.

AJP: What happens when parents push children to achieve more at younger ages?

Marano: As Brian Sutton-Smith has said, the opposite of play is depression. I see this in reality. One of the consequences of writing *A Nation of Wimps* is that I am invited to speak to parent, policy, and educational groups all around the country. I was invited to Wellesley, a very affluent area that is basically a bedroom community for Harvard Medical School. The children are extremely oriented towards success and doing well in school. Kids are pushed to be perfect. Their path leaves no room for play. These kids are under enormous pressure, and they don't know how to handle it. They become emotionally troubled at a very young age, and the town has a big problem in the high number of kids who intentionally injure themselves and attempt suicide in high school. This is not the best way to raise children.

AJP: Haven't parents always been anxious about their children's futures?

Marano: Sure. It goes with the territory of parenting. But until recently, most parents kept their anxieties to themselves, they didn't dump their worries wholesale onto their children, and they didn't try to design their children's path through childhood. Unfortunately, that's never been a very good recipe for child rearing. Anxiety has always gone along with child rearing, but as a parent you always bit your tongue and hid your anxiety. The interesting thing is that parents are so—I hate to use the word, but it is true—increasingly "narcissistic" that they're putting their own emotional needs ahead of their kids' developmental needs. They're not asking what their kids need to develop, and they're not recognizing that their kids need time and ability to decide how to spend their own time. So, as a consequence, not only do the kids not develop coping skills and the ability to manage themselves—which is the single greatest skill in life—but also they become psychologically hollow and have no identity.

Here's a perfect example of the way parents are managing their children's lives for their own narcissistic satisfaction. This is a true incident, told to me by the college administrator involved. It's also a clear example of how parents are managing the lives of kids far too long instead of letting out the leash entirely as they should. A young woman arrived at a fine, small, Eastern liberal arts college for freshman orientation. Her parents drove her, and they remained not only for the parent orientation but beyond. A few days into the orientation, the students were guided through the intricacies

of registering for classes when the young woman learned that a course she wanted was no longer open; it was full. She could, however, take it the next semester. At this point, the father intervened with the administration. "My daughter *has* to take this course this semester," he said. And he pulled out papers showing he had mapped out his daughter's college career for four years and he knew what courses she *needed* to take every single semester for the four years she was going to be there. "This is her first semester," the administrator confided, incredulous that anyone would not welcome college as a time and place for exploration and exposure to new ideas. The father said if she could not get the course she wanted, or that he wanted for her, she would have to go home. The school, much to its credit, held its ground, and the father withdrew his daughter from enrollment—for his totally inappropriate, selfish, have-to-be-in-control purposes—and in doing so he totally altered the course of her young life. Is this an extreme example? It was told to me at a meeting in which most of the other participants were college administrators. No one seemed to think this was especially unusual.

AJP: Another area of children's lives where parents sometimes intrude is youth sports. What are your thoughts about the relationship of youth sports and free play? Is there any?

Marano: Sports for kids have become structured and professionalized to an absurd and dangerous degree so that there is now no longer any room for casual athletic activity. If you want to play a sport, you have to make a huge commitment, and the commitment is not just to playing on a community or school team but also to playing on a club or travel team. If a kid is not on that path, he or she often has no one left with whom to play casually. Being on these teams consumes a great deal of time and travel, so that, actually, families have to make the commitment. It's not just the child's activity. It becomes the family's activity.

AJP: How do these activities affect family life, and what are the implications for free play?

Marano: Families have to reorganize their time around team schedules. There is no other way. This puts a child at the center of the family and makes the child's activity the organizing principle of family life. This is a huge distortion in the importance of the child. If that isn't bad enough, it leaves no room for some of the most important things in life—one of the most important being family dinner. The family is the civilizing and cultural

force in life. And family dinner is where it all comes home. The data are very clear. Eating dinner with at least one parent on most nights predicts both adjustment *and* school performance for kids—for all kids, up and down the socioeconomic spectrum. The factor that most correlates with achievement is kids having dinner with parents five or more times a week. But if you're on a club or travel team, dinner is a slice of pizza in the back of the SUV on the way from one practice or event to another. And while we're on the topic of what goes on at home, I should add that family dinner is important for another reason: it keeps the adults in touch with each other; it strengthens the marital relationship.

The great irony about the way sports are overorganized for kids these days is that you can no longer say that kids *play* sports. There is no play in them. It's an activity wholly organized by adults; and the kids are either in it 100 percent with their families, or they are not in it. The demands of transporting kids from event to event require family participation. I was at the opera not long ago, and I decided not to leave my seat for the second intermission. Instead, I had a conversation with the couple sitting next to me. They asked me what I do and I told them I was an editor and author, and then they wanted to know what I write about and I told them. They were from Indiana and had three kids. The first one went through whole routine with the travel team. The parents found it so disruptive of family life and made their child the center of family life to such an unhealthy degree that they discouraged the second child from joining. And by the third, they just disallowed it. The erosion of sport on a casual basis—what a quaint idea: casual sports—means that millions of kids now have no opportunity for vigorous physical activity. That whole sector of sport—the casual pickup game—is on its way to extinction. All too often for kids it's professionalized sports or nothing.

AJP: The notion of the casual pickup game, however rare it is today, brings us back to unsupervised play. Ms. Skenazy, what do you say to critics who charge that it's reckless to leave children at play unsupervised?

Skenazy: I do what I call "yuppie jujitsu," which is that I take the critics' fears about unsupervised play and try to turn them into fears about what happens if their children don't play and don't develop creativity, compassion, and communication. A child who doesn't engage in unsupervised free play doesn't develop the self-regulation that comes from hearing another kid say, "It's not your turn, go to the end of the line," which is a great way to

learn to wait your turn, better than anything that a parent could ever say to the kid. And, besides, parents always give them a second turn, and a third turn, and a fourth turn. Kids don't. So, I try to point out that play is a super vitamin for cognitive development. If you don't let kids have some unsupervised play where they can make decisions and compromises, they will not become as well developed as otherwise. And that just scares yuppies to death. Another thing I point out is that back when we were playing outside, the crime rate was higher than it is now.

AJP: So once again, it's a matter of balancing risks?

Marano: True, and it's more reckless not to let kids play. Look, there is risk in all physical movement. It's immediate. You fall off the merry-go-round, you might break an arm—now, today—and find yourself in the emergency room. But if you don't play, and you're not physically active, there is even greater risk; it just takes longer to manifest itself. It becomes obesity and inactivity and all the risks that accrue, such as diabetes and heart disease, later in life.

AJP: Should parents intervene when play gets rough?

Marano: It depends on your definition of rough. Mine includes blood. Should parents intervene when kids are having difficulty with each other? Not necessarily. I think that they should let kids work it out. But if things start to get to a little push-and-shove, a parent can move in closer and perhaps instead of intervening directly, try a kind of coaching. "Johnny, wouldn't it be nice if you let Sarah use your tricycle for three seconds, take a run around, and then bring it back, and then you can have it for the rest of the day?" You can begin to structure ways to solve little problems that kids can then appropriate as their own. From such situations kids learn how to solve problems for themselves. What's more, they learn that they *can* solve problems. They develop confidence in their ability to negotiate life on their own. Unfortunately, however, too many parents use any difficulty as an opportunity to intervene instead of letting the child solve the difficulty. Where another parent intervenes, it's often best to gently approach that parent and suggest that the adults back off and let the kids try to work it out with maybe a little coaching from the sidelines. That way, an attentive parent keeps from becoming an invasive parent.

AJP: Is it mainly parental anxiety, then, that needs managing?

Marano: Yes. And that's a good lesson to learn early on. Turning over responsibility to children is necessary, but it is usually accompanied by some parental

anxiety—the first time the child rides a bike without the training wheels, the first time the child rides the subway alone, the first time the child drives the family car. Sooner or later, the child has to negotiate life on his own. It's best for parents to turn over responsibility to the child and display confidence in the child's ability to negotiate for herself. Kids tend to live up to those expectations. Not perfectly. But they want to and tend to. It may take more than one try, but no one learns to tie shoelaces the first time.

AJP: How can parents determine when they're worrying too much?

Skenazy: Frankly, I'm always worried. But part of my job as a parent is to worry, and the other part is to shut up and let my kid go on the overnight. The alternative is to have them ride with the training wheels forever.

Marano: Beginning with play, parents have to let the leash out gradually, allowing kids to become responsible for themselves in relatively small increments. I remember when my husband and I decided it was time to take away curfew from my older son. We figured it was best if *he* decided what time to come home, although he had to tell us what time before he went out. I won't tell you what age it was; it was embarrassingly early and we didn't tell anyone else what we were doing, but it worked for our kid. Okay, I will tell you: he was thirteen. At first there were nights when I wrote the funeral speech. But, we noticed very, very quickly that staying out lost its allure. He began to curfew himself; he developed that internal mechanism. You don't develop that unless you're given the opportunity. The job of the parent is to find a way to control the worry so that it's not dumped on the kids and ends up crippling them psychologically. Kids then learn to regulate themselves, and soon they're ready to take over the world. So, when are parents invasive? When they start taking over things that their kids should be managing on their own. When you're so worried about your kid's homework being correct that you wind up giving them the answers, you're actually taking over and doing the homework for them.

AJP: So how can parents allow kids to range freely yet still protect them from realistic dangers?

Skenazy: You teach them what to stay away from and how. One way to stay safe is to develop street smarts, and the only way to do that is by being on the streets. You teach them to cross the street safely. You teach them they can talk to strangers but not go off with strangers. That way, you are allowing them to get help from the vast majority of people—who all happen to be pretty good—in case they are pursued, which is very unlikely, by somebody

who is bad. You teach them how to swim. You teach them to be responsible. That's how.

AJP: What about parental efforts to protect kids by segregating them by age when they play? Is that useful?

Marano: No. Kids need to play both with peers and with kids of different ages. One of the great problems with whatever play spaces are left to kids today is that for legal reasons many have been dumbed down and now appeal mostly to toddlers. Playgrounds that once had children of all ages running around or engaged in activity groups now host only little ones. The loss is manifold. There are no bigger kids from whom the little ones can learn the intricacies of childhood and how to play games, or whom they can observe and aspire to emulate. So much learning takes place by little ones observing older children. Segregation hurts the older kids too. By not playing with younger kids, older ones are missing a great way to develop empathy and to sharpen social skills by teaching them.

AJP: In addition to fear, what else makes it difficult for adults to recognize and accept the value of free play?

Marano: The value of play is not always immediately obvious to parents. It's counterintuitive to them because play, to adults, looks like a waste of time. The value of play lies in the fact that it is not directed toward goals. It is totally of the moment, growing organically out of the needs of kids. However, the very fact that play is not directed toward goals and that the outcome isn't known in advance—there's uncertainty built into it—scares today's adults. But they need to understand that play is critical for the brain. That is the great hidden secret of play. Play stimulates genes for nerve growth in the executive portion of the brain, the frontal cortex. It fosters maturation of the very centers of the brain that allow kids to exert control over attention, to regulate emotions, to control their own behavior—all of which allow them to learn. This is a very subtle trick that nature plays—I call it nature's spitball—it uses something that's not directed toward goals to create the very mental machinery for being goal directed. One team of neuroscientists I know has found that within one hour after a single thirty-minute play session, the activity of about four hundred genes are significantly modified. What play is doing is laying down the foundation for the circuitry of self-regulation and attention.

AJP: What final thoughts do you have for our readers?

Marano: We all must remember that the goal of raising children is to produce

the next generation of society, to produce independent human beings capable of making decisions and finding their own paths to usefulness, meaning, and happiness. That doesn't happen automatically when a child turns twenty-one. It happens, or should happen, gradually. Independence is a long march that begins at birth. Ideally, a strong and secure attachment forms between infant and care giver, and gradually that attachment gets internalized; the child carries around a representation of that nurturing, comforting care giver. And it is that representation that allows a child to begin to explore the world on his own. That is nature's first coping system, and it's 100 percent portable for a reason—to foster independence. From the moment our children are born, our parental duty is to prepare them to function well without us. Play is the next great facilitator of that system. In addition to all the great things play does for the brain, the peer play of childhood is important in giving kids social skills to be used in all kinds of situations and is important in shaping a whole generation.

AJP: Do we have reason to hope that free play can revive?

Marano: I'll end with another story. I live on a street that's about three blocks long, but it's not a through street. Kids used to play on it, and I really loved watching them. But now, they play there only rarely. Still, on some days I come out of my house and walk down the street, and there are a couple of kids in the middle of the street tossing around a football or baseball. They stop when I walk by, but I always turn to them and say, "Don't stop for me! It is so delightful to see you guys out here playing." And, at the end of my block, there's a beautiful courthouse. It has a very low, gradual set of steps and a broad plaza in front and is just a wonderful training ground for young skateboarders. Sometimes I'll see eight-year-old kids playing there without parents. Those scenes give me hope.

AJP: Anything else?

Skenazy: That's the bottom line. Let kids play!