

Free-range parenting laws letting kids roam could catch on

April 10 2018, by Lindsay Whitehurst



In this April 6, 2018, photo, Caleb Coulter, 10, left, and his sister Kendra, 12, play tag during a visit to the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City. Critics say letting children strike out on their own can expose them to serious dangers. But lawmakers and advocates in several states say the protective pendulum has swung too far. They want to send a message that parents who raise their children in a healthy environment can grant them more freedom. Amy Coulter, mother of Caleb and Kendra, said she doesn't call herself a free-range parent. But she does avoid intervening with teachers on her older children's grades and encourages her children to use their own money to buy things at the grocery store. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

After Utah passed the country's first law legalizing so-called free-range parenting, groups in states from New York to Texas are pushing for similar steps to bolster the idea that supporters say is an antidote for anxiety-plagued parents and overscheduled kids.

Free-range parenting is the concept that giving kids the freedom to do things alone—like explore a playground or ride a bike to school—makes them healthier, happier and more resilient.

It surfaced nearly a decade ago, when Lenore Skenazy touched off a firestorm with a column about letting her then-9-year-old son ride the New York City subway alone. Since then, she's become a vocal advocate for free-range parenting.

Critics say letting kids strike out on their own can expose them to serious dangers, from criminals to cars. Parents have been investigated by child-welfare authorities in several high-profile cases, including a Maryland couple who allowed their 10- and 6-year-old children to walk home alone from a park in 2015.

But lawmakers and policy groups in several states say the protective pendulum has swung too far, and it's time to send a message that [parents](#) who raise their children in a healthy environment can grant them more freedom.

Utah's new law specifies that it isn't neglectful to let well-cared-for children travel to school, explore a playground or stay in the car alone if they're mature enough to handle it.

Free-range parenting differs from the concept of latchkey kids, or those who take care of themselves after school, in that it generally emphasizes getting kids outside in the neighborhood as a way to develop independence, Boston-based clinical psychologist Bobbi Wegner said.



In this April 6, 2018, photo, Amy Coulter, right, and her husband Mark, second left, play with their children at the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City. After Utah passed the country's first law legalizing so-called free-range parenting, groups from New York to Texas are pushing for similar steps to bolster the idea that supporters say is an antidote for anxiety-plagued parents and overscheduled children. Amy Coulter, a stay-at-home Utah mother, said she doesn't call herself a free-range parent. But she does avoid intervening with teachers on her older children's grades and encourages her children to use their own money to buy things at the grocery store. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

Fears about letting kids make their own way date at least in part to cases like Etan Patz, who was among the first missing children pictured on milk cartons after disappearing while he walked to his New York City bus stop alone in 1979.

Meanwhile, as education has become more essential in the workforce, parents are increasingly eager to give their kids a leg up with lessons in everything from coding to cello.

"We sign our kids up for all these activities—tutoring, different things—to create this perfect resume from a very young age, but it's

really at a detriment to the kid's mental health," Wegner said.

While giving kids independence with parent oversight helps, it's hard for adults to escape pressure to hover, she said.

"Parents need permission to do this," Wegner said. A self-avowed free-range parent, she said a police officer once knocked on her door and threatened to call child services after seeing her then-3-and-a-half-year-old son standing at the end of the driveway talking to neighborhood kids. She'd like to see Massachusetts follow Utah's lead.

In New York, Democratic state Assemblyman Phil Steck said he's gearing up to introduce a similar proposal.

"When I was a child, you let your dogs and your children out after breakfast and ... they had to be home for dinner," he said. "I felt I gained a lot more from just playing on the street than my children did from being in organized sports activities."



In this April 6, 2018, photo, Amy Coulter, left, and her daughter April, 7, talk, while playing at the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City. Critics say letting children strike out on their own can expose them to serious dangers. But lawmakers and advocates in several states say the protective pendulum has swung too far. They want to send a message that parents who raise their children in a healthy environment can grant them more freedom. Amy Coulter, a stay-at-home Utah mother, said she doesn't call herself a free-range parent. But she does avoid intervening with teachers on her older children's grades and encourages her children to use their own money to buy things at the grocery store. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

It's an idea that cuts across the ideological spectrum. Brandon Logan with the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation is working with lawmakers for a bill next year.

"We expect adults to be independent, and we expect parents to raise

their children to be independent, and you can't do that whenever children are being micromanaged," Logan said.

A conservative group is also pushing for a bill in Idaho, and an Arkansas lawmaker whose effort failed plans to bring it back again.

They're all taking a close look at Utah's law, which sailed through the Legislature and was signed by the governor of the majority-Mormon state known for big families and wide-open spaces. It doesn't specify how old kids should be to do things alone, which lawmakers say will allow authorities to weigh each case separately.

Discretion like that is important, said Stephen Hinshaw, a University of California, Berkeley psychology professor. Not every child is ready to ride their bike alongside busy roads, and participating in things like music lessons can teach them important skills.

"Parents have to be smart about what is helping foster self-reliance and what is putting kids in a dangerous spot," he said.

Amy Coulter, a stay-at-home Utah mom of four girls and a boy, said she doesn't call herself a free-range parent. But she does avoid intervening with teachers on her older kids' grades and encourages her kids use their own money to buy things at the grocery store.



In this April 6, 2018, photo, Amy Coulter, center right, and her husband Mark walk together with their children April, 7, left, and Kendra, 12, at the Place Heritage Park in Salt Lake City. After Utah passed the country's first law legalizing so-called free-range parenting, groups from New York to Texas are pushing for similar steps to bolster the idea that supporters say is an antidote for anxiety-plagued parents and overscheduled children. Amy Coulter, a stay-at-home Utah mother, said she doesn't call herself a free-range parent. But she does avoid intervening with teachers on her older children's grades and encourages her children to use their own money to buy things at the grocery store. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

"I want them to know that they're capable," she said of her [children](#), who range in age from 5 to 14.

In her Lehi neighborhood, kids often roam the block "snack-hopping" at different homes.

Recent Utah transplant Krista Whipple said she's liked the concept of

free-range parenting for years, but it was tough to practice it in her old Los Angeles neighborhood when most kids stayed behind fences.

"I didn't want to raise my kids all cooped up, but it always made me think twice," said Whipple, a program manager at a St. George youth homeless shelter who has two boys and a girl who are 6, 4 and 3.

"Kids are not in constant danger, and it's OK to let them outside, and it's OK ... to let them get lost," she said. "They'll find their way home."

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