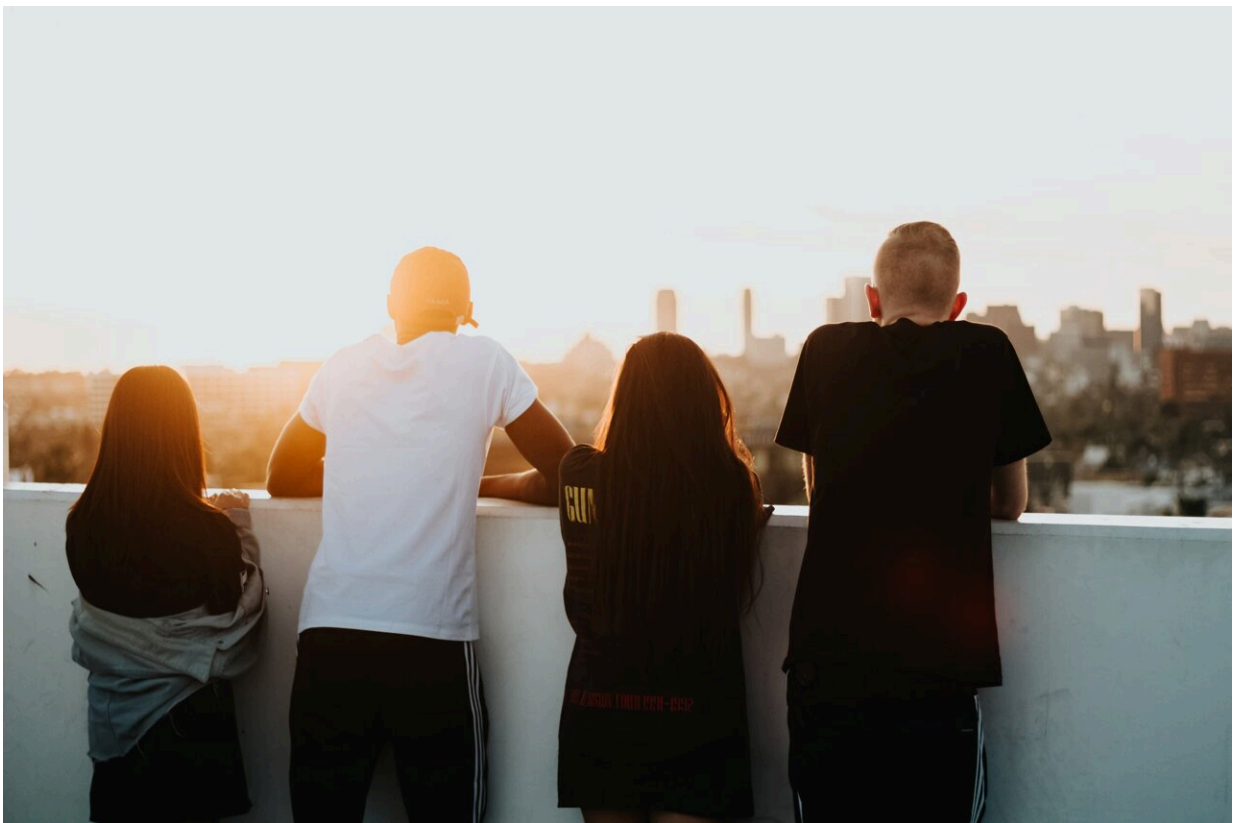


Young people are getting unhappier: Lack of childhood freedom and independence may be partly to blame

April 11 2024, by Fiorentina Sterkaj



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Experts often highlight social media and harsh economic times as key reasons why young [people are getting unhappier](#). And while those factors are important, I would like to emphasize another.

Younger generations have less freedom and independence than previous generations did. The area where children are allowed to range unsupervised outside [has shrunk by 90%](#) since the 1970s.

Parents increasingly organize entertainment—ranging from play dates and sports and [music classes](#) to family cinema trips—for their children, rather than letting them come up with it themselves. Perhaps this can help explain recent reports that many teenagers today [choose to be holed up in their bedrooms](#).

The lack of childhood freedom isn't just a result of parental control. Societal expectations and [school policies](#) also have huge influences.

It is important to note that constraints to freedom often stem from well-meaning intentions, such as safety concerns (location tracking, for example) or cultural norms. Understandably, nobody wants to be the parent who lets their kid take (perceived) risks if others don't. But there are risks to over-protecting children too. It can inadvertently hinder their psychological development.

Emotional, social and cognitive effects

Psychologist Jean Piaget emphasized the importance of exploration and experimentation in cognitive development in the 1950s. He noted that children construct their understanding of the world [through active engagement](#) with their environment. By restricting children's freedom to explore and take age-appropriate risks, we deprive them of opportunities

for intellectual curiosity and innovation.

A lack of independence can undermine [young people](#)'s sense of agency and control over their lives. And research in psychology consistently demonstrates that when people, young or old, feel powerless and constrained by external forces, such as parental supervision or societal expectations, [it can lead to](#) frustration, helplessness and [low self-esteem](#).

Moreover, the absence of autonomy limits young people's opportunities for self-discovery, creativity and personal growth. When children are constantly guided and supervised, they miss out on the invaluable experiences of problem-solving, decision-making and learning from mistakes.

The decline in independence can have implications for social and [emotional development](#). Children may get love, support and attention within the family unit. But spending too much time with parents may lead to difficulties getting on with peers, who don't provide the same unconditional love and support.

Indeed, when children are constantly surrounded by adults and structured activities, they may struggle to develop meaningful relationships, assertiveness and resilience. Research highlights the [importance of peer interactions](#) in shaping social competence and emotional intelligence. After all, parents may not require you to empathize with them, but friends will.

By orchestrating play dates and entertainment, parents may therefore inadvertently limit their children's ability to navigate social dynamics. This will include learning empathy and developing interpersonal skills independently. It will also set an expectation that children will come to internalize the idea that "parents will do things so I don't have to"—leading to further lack of accomplishment.

The lack of independence can also contribute to feelings of boredom, restlessness and disengagement. Humans need to be engaged in activities that challenge and absorb our attention, [leading to feelings of fulfillment](#) and happiness. When children are constantly entertained and supervised, they may struggle to find activities that naturally capture their interest and provide a sense of purpose and enjoyment.

This is important. In defining happiness, [positive psychology emphasizes both the emotional aspect](#), such as experiencing positive emotions, and the cognitive aspect, which involves a sense of overall satisfaction with one's life, including meaning and purpose.

Research [has shown](#) that parenting that supports autonomy, encouraging children to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their actions, is linked to better psychological well-being in adolescents.

Conversely, excessive parental control [is associated with](#) higher levels of emotional distress and lower levels of life satisfaction among adolescents.

The school environment [also plays a significant role](#). Zero-tolerance policies, strict disciplinary measures and standardized testing are commonplace. But overly strict and punitive disciplinary practices are associated with [decreased intrinsic motivation](#) and academic engagement among students.

Recent developments in response to safety concerns, such as increased surveillance and monitoring within schools, further intrude upon students' autonomy and independence. Metal detectors, security cameras and random searches ultimately create an atmosphere of surveillance and control.

Age-appropriate freedom

Evidence supports the idea that freedom and independence is crucial for the happiness and well-being of young people.

There are ways to let your children have age-appropriate freedoms. A five-year-old, for example, can be allowed and encouraged to butter their own toast, make their bed, or play on their own in the garden. A 10-year-old, meanwhile, should be able to walk to and from school on their own, be responsible for their homework and keep their space tidy.

And when children reach the age of 15, you can encourage them to cook a family meal, do laundry and arrange travel to school, clubs or friends' houses independently rather than be chauffeured by their parents.

It can also be useful to decline to provide entertainment from time to time, letting them work something out on their own. Children are wonderfully creative and if there is nothing to do, they will often think of something eventually. This could even apply to play dates. It is OK to invite a child's friend over with no specific entertainment in mind.

Moving forward, it is essential to promote environments that foster autonomy, self-expression and independent learning, both at home and in educational institutions, to support the development and happiness of young people.

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