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Helicopter or Free Range: A Dilemma of Modern Parenting

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Helicopter or Free Range: A Dilemma of Modern Parenting

Abstract

"What philosophy should we be using as parents? Should we seek to be helicopters? Should we give our children free range?"

Posting about the challenges of modern parenting from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/helicopter-or-free-range-a-dilemma-of-modern-parenting>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Helicopter or Free Range: A Dilemma of Modern Parenting

 [inallthings.org/helicopter-or-free-range-a-dilemma-of-modern-parenting](https://allthings.org/helicopter-or-free-range-a-dilemma-of-modern-parenting)

Donald Roth

When I first heard stories about a couple of parents in Maryland who were being investigated by Child Services for letting their children wander the streets alone, the visions in my head were of some poor, scared kids navigating the projects of East Baltimore like a scene from the HBO show *The Wire*, but then I actually read some of the [coverage of the story](#). There I learned that the Meitiv family live in Silver Spring, a wealthy suburb of Washington D.C., and that the incident in question occurred when the children were picked up by a police officer mid-way through their walk home past the Discovery Channel building.

That changed things for me.

I lived in D.C. for four and a half years. I've walked up Georgia Avenue past the Discovery Channel building numerous times. *(There's a pretty decent and always entertaining pirate-themed bar just up the street. Try the grog sometime if you're in the area.)* It's not a particularly dangerous or run-down area. In fact, it's pretty well maintained, if a bit busy in terms of road traffic along Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue. If anything, the fact that someone noticed and cared enough to flag down a police officer to pick up the unattended ten and six year old siblings only reinforces the conclusion that this was a pretty decent, safe area.

Intrigued, I began to read more, and so I was introduced to the world of [free range parenting](#), a movement which Lenore Skenazy inadvertently kickstarted in 2008 after her April 1 article in the *New York Sun* entitled *Why I Let My 9-Year-Old Ride the Subway Alone* went viral. The Meitiv children are "free range kids," and there have been a [whole spate of stories](#) in the last few years involving parents who have faced criminal charges or investigations by Child Services for allowing their children to be out in public unattended.

Blessedly, at least to my legal sensibilities, these cases have overwhelmingly ended in dropped charges or determinations that no abuse was on-going (although, as far as I can find, the investigation of the Meitiv's is [still](#) on-going), and Ms. Skenazy also points out that these arrests and investigations are [not that common](#).

Nonetheless, these incidents have sparked a national debate over parenting, and it has provided more than one occasion for my wife and I to play armchair quarterback and to think about what exactly the boundaries will be for our nearly two year old daughter when she gets older. As we've talked this over, though, I find myself dissatisfied with what is framed in popular culture and the media as an "either/or" choice. Is the parental choice to be constantly hovering or to let children roam wild? There are a few reasons why I'm not entirely comfortable with either philosophy.

Kids are Different: Places are Different

The first reason I have a hard time picking a camp to champion is because kids are different. I know. This is a really profound statement. But I don't think that this should be under-emphasized. In the legal world, children in this 7-17 window are subjectively evaluated when we talk about things like liability and delinquency because society realizes that children develop at virtually unique paces, traveling through

similar stages, but at differing rates and to differing degrees. It's the big problem I have with condemning free range parents for letting their kids outside unattended. I've known some incredibly responsible 6 and 10 year olds. I've also known plenty that have to be supervised lest they lick electrical sockets or eat paste. The trouble with many parenting philosophies is that they struggle with taking a one size fits all approach to kids that just don't fit that model.

Not only are kids different, but comparing unaccompanied children in one area to those in another is not always an apples to apples comparison. Many of the stories that are making the news involve parents in urban areas. For those of us that don't live in those places, the thought of leaving children to ride the subway or wander the streets alone seems horrifying. As I confessed above, my initial reaction ran in this direction, but then I thought about my experience living in downtown D.C., and things really don't seem as horrifying as I first thought. Beyond this, though, many of us live in suburbs or out in rural areas, and here it really doesn't seem as scary. To be honest, when I pull onto the street to pick up my daughter from daycare during the summer here in Sioux Center, I'm more frightened for the adults trying to wade through the *Lord of the Flies*-style gangs of rowdy children roving the streets than I am for the kids.

Structured is Good: Free is Good

The second reason I have a hard time picking a camp to champion is because there are attractive attributes to both movements. The philosophy often derided as "helicopter parenting" was famously categorized by Dr. Annette Lareau in her book *Unequal Childhoods* as "concerted cultivation." In her study, Dr. Lareau observed that middle and upper class parents were often more structured and interventionist in their children's lives than the "natural growth" method used by the lower classes. Her conclusion was that this active intervention had a long-term beneficial impact on the development and eventual socioeconomic status of the children of white collar parents.

There are things that I significantly question about Dr. Lareau's analysis and conclusions, but I have seen many examples of the type of parenting that she's describing. Although usually derided as parents hovering over their children's every move, protecting them from every bruise and bully, some parents, such as [Elisabeth Stokes](#), a college professor in Maine, reject the idea that there's "any benefit in cultural trauma being a part of our children's growing up." I see some appeal in this, and there's further appeal in other emphases in this movement, such as providing structured activities and actively encouraging the development of reasoning and linguistic skills. Kids need to learn to navigate structures, they need to be pushed at times, and it's important that they feel loved and protected by their parents.

Of course, there is great appeal in the "free range" approach too (although not in the name, which for me evokes images of children being "gluten-free" or "organic" or "delicious"... I really don't want my kids described as food). I see too many young men and women in college who need everything spoon fed to them, who quail from anything challenging, and who haven't learned how to deal responsibly with the first real breath of freedom they have been given. The notion that we have to let children develop their independence and creativity when they are young (and still under parental care) is very appealing to me.

I can see good things in both philosophies, and I recognize that kids, parents, and situations are all different. So must I choose to be either a helicopter or a free-ranger?

Statues and Saplings

Perhaps part of the solution here can be found in the idea of an *operative metaphor*, an idea I developed when talking about discipleship in our upper-level worldview class. An operative metaphor is an image or analogy we use to guide our understanding of a concept and our imagination in working out how that concept should be applied. It can be an anchor for what Walter Brueggemann calls "faithful improvisation."

So how do we imagine our task as parents? I think many of us see ourselves in the role of molding and shaping our children, as if we are artisans chiseling out and perfecting a statue. After all, parenting is an art, right? Just a little dab of pressure here and the right structure there, and our own little David will rival anything Michelangelo could sculpt (at least he will have the decency not to flash his ding-a-ling in public). But are our children statues?

I think a better metaphor is to compare parenting to cultivating a tree. A young sapling will need care and protection from the harshest of the elements, but its primary needs are nourishment and sunshine. A sapling that survives will become a tree whether we like it or not, so we have to think about how to foster that growth, and that will involve some pruning and care, but it will also involve just letting the tree flourish on its own. There are lots of ways to take this, and plenty of areas where the analogy breaks down (let's not get into pollination); however, I think this has two primary advantages over the sculpting perspective: First, children are not statues, they are alive. Second, Christ at multiple junctures uses very similar metaphors. Scripture compares us to fig trees, vines, and many other growing things, carefully tended, but raised to bear fruit, and we must recognize that our children are like us in that respect.

So what philosophy should we be using as parents? Should we seek to be helicopters? Should we give our children free range? I don't think that the choice is a dichotomy. I also don't think that it's just picking a mushy middle ground (free helicopters!). We can root our task in what we diligently pray our children are and will be: children of God, and we can guide our imagination and understanding of how parenting works out by being similarly rooted in the operative metaphors of Scripture.