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Why Do We Judge Parents For Putting Kids At Perceived — But Unreal — Risk?

By Tania Lombrozo for NPR
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Have you ever heard your parents talk about their experiences growing up? Older generations tended to have more opportunities for independence as children than they do today. In this interview, Tania Lombrozo talks to three researchers who conducted an experiment exploring how people judge others' actions as parents and how they determine if a child is at risk in a situation. As you read, take notes on what contributes to people's judgements of other parents and their decisions.

- [1] Many parents who grew up playing outdoors with friends, walking alone to the park or to school, and enjoying other moments of independent play are now raising children in a world with very different norms.

In the United States today, leaving children unsupervised is grounds for moral outrage and can lead to criminal charges.

What's changed?

One possibility is that the risks to children have changed. What was safe in the past may be unsafe today, placing children in genuine danger. But, for the most part, the data don't support this. Statistics from the National Crime Victimization Survey, for example, suggest that violent crime rates have *decreased* since the 1970s (and not only when it comes to children, whom one could argue are benefiting from the increased oversight).



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- [5] The odds that a child will be abducted by a stranger — one of the fears that motivates constant supervision — are tiny in comparison with the odds that a child will be injured in a car accident. Yet parents aren't under investigation for choosing to drive their kids to school.

So here's another possibility. It's not that risks to children have increased, provoking an increase in moral outrage when children are left unattended. Instead, it could be that moral attitudes toward parenting have changed, such that leaving children unsupervised is now judged morally wrong. And because it's judged morally wrong, people overestimate the risk.

This may seem to get things the wrong way around, but it's supported by new research available Tuesday in the open access journal *Collabra*. In a series of clever experiments, authors Ashley Thomas, Kyle Stanford and Barbara Sarnecka find evidence that shifting people's moral attitudes toward a parent influences the perceived risk to that parent's unattended child.

To get a sense of the experiments they conducted, consider a case from earlier this month: A 2-year-old was found unattended after his parents allegedly left home to play Pokémon Go. As expected, the case generated plenty of moral outrage. ("If you can't take care of a child," wrote one commentator, "DON'T HAVE ONE!")

But consider: How much risk was there of some harm coming to the child while the parents were gone? And, more importantly, would you feel differently about this risk if the circumstances were otherwise the same, but the parents had left the child unattended by accident, or to go to work? In other words, would decreasing the moral outrage one feels toward the parents decrease the perception of risk to the child?

- [10] To get at this question experimentally, Thomas and her collaborators created a series of vignettes¹ in which a parent left a child unattended for some period of time, and participants indicated the risk of harm to the child during that period. For example, in one vignette, a 10-month-old was left alone for 15 minutes, asleep in the car in a cool, underground parking garage. In another vignette, an 8-year-old was left for an hour at a Starbucks, one block away from her parent's location.

To experimentally manipulate participants' moral attitude toward the parent, the experimenters varied the reason the child was left unattended across a set of six experiments with over 1,300 online participants. In some cases, the child was left alone unintentionally (for example, in one case, a mother is hit by a car and knocked unconscious after buckling her child into her car seat, thereby leaving the child unattended in the car seat). In other cases, the child was left unattended so the parent could go to work, do some volunteering, relax or meet a lover.

Not surprisingly, the parent's reason for leaving a child unattended affected participants' judgments of whether the parent had done something immoral: Ratings were over 3 on a 10-point scale even when the child was left unattended unintentionally, but they skyrocketed to nearly 8 when the parent left to meet a lover. Ratings for the other cases fell in between.

The more surprising result was that perceptions of risk followed precisely the same pattern. Although the details of the cases were otherwise the same — that is, the age of the child, the duration and location of the unattended period, and so on — participants thought children were in significantly greater danger when the parent left to meet a lover than when the child was left alone unintentionally. The ratings for the other cases, once again, fell in between. In other words, participants' *factual* judgments of how much danger the child was in while the parent was away varied according to the extent of their *moral* outrage concerning the parent's reason for leaving.

Additional analyses suggested that it was indeed participants' judgment of the parent's immorality that drove up their assessments of risk. The authors sum up their findings like this: "People don't only think that leaving children alone is dangerous and therefore immoral. *They also think it is immoral and therefore dangerous.*"

1. a brief but detailed description, account, or episode

- [15] In a conversation by email, the paper's authors (developmental psychologists Ashley Thomas and Barbara Sarnecka, and philosopher Kyle Stanford, all of the University of California, Irvine) were kind enough to answer a few questions about their research and the politics of parenting.

What motivated you to pursue this line of research?

Ashley: When Barbara and I first started talking about this project, the case that really stood out to me was the one about Debra Harrell — the McDonald's worker who let her 9-year-old daughter play in a busy public park for several hours during the day while she (Harrell) was at work. The daughter had a key to her home (which was a six-minute walk away from the park) and a cellphone. But when the girl mentioned to an adult in the park that her mother was at work, the adult called the police, who arrested and jailed Harrell and put the daughter in state custody. I thought, here's a single mother who works for low wages for a corporation that doesn't provide child care, and she was treated as a criminal for letting her daughter do something that is relatively safe. It seemed like people were angry at this woman for not being a full-time mom — for not fulfilling the unrealistic expectation that mothers should be with their children at all times. Those are moral judgments, but people weren't talking about it in moral terms. Instead, they were using the language of risk and danger — saying that Harrell was criminally negligent² because she had left her daughter in a dangerous situation. So we started thinking about how people's estimates of risk might not be about risk at all, but about moral judgment.

Barbara: I completely agree. Another piece that got me thinking was a first-person account by Kim Brooks that appeared in Salon a couple of years ago. Brooks was a mom who let her 4-year-old son wait in the car for five minutes, on a cool day, while she dashed into a store to pick up a pair of headphones. A passerby saw the kid in the car playing on his iPad, took a photo of the license plate and reported Brooks to the police, who subsequently traced her license plate and charged her with a crime. Reading about the incident, I was struck by how the passerby, the police and the court all seemed to share the assumption that the child alone in the car was in terrible, imminent danger — which is just not objectively true. Now, to be clear, it's not that unusual for a lot of people to share the same irrational fear. For example, a lot of people are afraid to ride in airplanes but not in cars, even though planes are much safer than cars. What's interesting about this phobia about leaving a child alone is that (1) it is so widely shared, and (2) it has acquired the force of law — Harrell and Brooks were literally charged with crimes for allowing their children to be alone in circumstances that were, in their judgment as parents, age-appropriate and acceptably low-risk. I think the safety data show that their judgment was correct. As an analogy, imagine that you suddenly find yourself in a world where the fear of flying has become so common that parents who are seen trying to board a plane with their children are charged with child abuse, even though flying is actually not very dangerous.

Kyle: The increasing frequency of legal action against parents of the kind that both Ashley and Barbara describe was certainly our primary motivation. But in addition, we are all (I think) intrigued by both classic and more recent experimental work in psychology showing that people modify their factual beliefs in response to pressures that are surprising, including bringing those factual beliefs more closely in line with their moral views. This was part of the background that led us to wonder if widespread moral disapproval of leaving children unsupervised might actually be driving the hysteria about risk to children who are left alone.

- [20] **What surprised you most about your findings?**

2. failing to take proper care in doing something

Ashley: I was most surprised by the studies where people were explicitly asked to rate the morality (rightness or wrongness) of the mother's actions, and specifically by how they judged mothers who left their children unintentionally. For example, the mother turns away from the child for a moment to return a grocery cart and is hit by a car while doing so. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 meant the mother did nothing wrong, people's average rating of this situation was above 3. In other words, people think that a parent who steps away from their child even for a moment has done something morally wrong. I don't have children myself, and I guess I was surprised that people are SO judgmental about other people's parenting.

Kyle: I think what surprised me most were the results of two modifications we tried. In the first, we asked subjects to make an explicit moral judgment about the parent in addition to a judgment about risk. The idea was that if people had a different way to express their moral disapproval, this might lower the pressure to use risk judgments as a way of condemning the parents. In fact, asking subjects to make a moral judgment about the parents as well made their moral judgments influence their judgments about risk even more, not less. The second modification was to ask subjects to actually list the concrete things they thought might happen while the parent was gone. We expected that forcing subjects to explicitly consider what dangers are faced by the child would reduce the influence of moral judgment on risk judgment. But adding this manipulation did not change anything.

Barbara: I guess what surprised me the most was the difference in responses that we got from different groups of participants — men vs. women and parents vs. nonparents. I expected that mothers would be less likely than other people to buy into this paranoid view that any child, of any age, left alone for any length of time is going to drop dead the minute the mother looks away. I guess I figured that I'm a mother, and I'm not hysterical about this, so I assumed that other mothers weren't either. But I was wrong — mothers rated all the situations as more dangerous than fathers did; followed by childless women and finally childless men. The people with presumably the most child care experience (mothers) actually expressed the most exaggerated overestimates of risk. I was genuinely surprised by that. But I guess that's because I was expecting people to be rational, and people are just not rational about this subject.

Do you think there's a lesson in your data for parents (or for nonparents)? If so, what is it?

- [25] **Ashley:** It seems to be socially acceptable to harass parents (particularly mothers) who are "caught" leaving their child unattended for any time at all. I found several videos online where someone (usually a young man) sees a baby waiting in a car outside a store, and he videotapes himself going into the store to berate³ and yell at the mother of this baby. These guys are so proud of their behavior that they post the whole thing on Facebook, bragging about how they put these women in their place. It's like "catching" parents breaking this new rule gives strangers license to harass them. I would be happy if this study prompted people to think about that, and if people moved away from this mentality of "punishing the bad mommy."

3. **Berate** (*verb*): to scold or criticize angrily

Barbara: I guess what I would like people to start thinking about is how this new legal standard of paranoid parenting enshrines⁴ a kind of class privilege. Besides the fact that it is irrational, the idea that you must watch your child every single second until they turn 18 is deeply classist. It's not something you can even aim for unless you have a whole lot of money, and probably not a lot of children. For parents who are working, who have more than one child, who need to get something else done during the day — to say nothing of single parents — that model of parenting is absurd. If you think about Debra Harrell's situation, she's raising a child while working a minimum-wage job. Suddenly, we as a society have decided (without any rational basis) that she is negligent for allowing her 9-year-old to play in a public park. This is very, very disturbing to me. It is basically criminalizing poverty and single parenthood.

Kyle: I think these findings have clear policy implications. At the moment, we are simply relying on the intuitions of neighbors, police officers, DAs, judges, etc., to decide what constitutes negligence or endangerment, and we've shown that those intuitions are systematically influenced by their moral approval or disapproval of the parent's conduct. Of course we should not allow parents to leave children in situations that are objectively dangerous, but unless there is clear evidence that something poses a significant risk, it should be parents who decide whether and when their child is mature enough to walk to school, wait in the car, to be home alone, etc. Right now, in many situations, if a social worker or police officer thinks the child is in danger, they can intervene and take the child, arrest the parents, etc. But what our data suggest is that when people think they are judging danger to a child, much of what they are actually doing is imposing a moral judgment on the child's parents. The relevant "danger" should be legally defined in terms of actual, immediate, demonstrable risk, rather than left up to the unexamined intuitions of bystanders, social workers, police officers or other individuals who may think something must be dangerous when it is actually quite safe. For example, eight times more children are killed in parking lots than in parked cars. But when a parent with a child in tow runs into the grocery store for a few minutes, he or she has to choose between allowing the child to wait in the car, which is safer but might get her arrested or jailed and/or her child taken away — and the more dangerous option of bringing the child with her because this is socially approved.

Also, in support of Ashley's suggestion, many parents have told me about circumstances in which they would leave their children alone were it not for the attitudes of other parents (and fear of legal action, etc.). So... don't be so judgy when you know your judgments are being influenced by things besides actual evidence, don't allow those same judgments to determine criminal standards of negligence or endangerment, and parents who judge that they can safely leave their children alone in a given situation shouldn't feel guilty about doing so just because they know that decision would be (irrationally) condemned by others. (Of course that doesn't mean that parents never leave their children alone in what are objectively dangerous situations or that they shouldn't feel guilty about doing so.)

Why do you think norms about leaving children unattended have changed so much over the past generation, especially in light of the fact that the risk of harm to children has not increased?

4. to preserve or cherish as sacred

[30] **Ashley:** We discuss this in our paper a bit. We think that something called the availability heuristic⁵ clearly plays a role. The way the availability heuristic works is this: The easier it is for you to think of an example of something happening, the more frequently you think that thing happens. Take the example of child abduction by strangers. It's actually incredibly rare. But when it occasionally happens, it is covered on the news 24/7. Intellectually, we know these are rare events, but they really scare us. It's as if we're seeing people we know get abducted and murdered, or sold into the sex trade or whatever, all the time. So we hugely overestimate the actual risk of that happening. But it is worth noting that this norm has not arisen everywhere. For example, I was in Norway earlier this year and people left buggies/strollers with infants outside of stores while they went inside to get coffee or have lunch with a friend. You never see this in the states. This is interesting because Norwegians and Americans presumably have similar access to news, so I'm not sure why so many Americans believe that any child left unattended is going to be abducted while Norwegians don't believe that.

Barbara: Agreed. And another thing that I think has changed is that everyone is much more afraid of legal liability⁶ than they were 40 years ago. Children playing without parents in a public park may be seen as a potential liability for the city; a kid without a parent in a store buying Legos is seen as a potential liability for the store, and so on. To give some personal examples: I have two sons, ages 11 and 16. Recently, there was a day when the 16-year-old had to be at soccer practice and the 11-year-old had to be at chess class, both at 5 p.m. So I told my husband that I was going to drop off the 16-year-old at the park at 4:30. My husband (a longtime coach in this soccer league) said: "Well, I guess you can do that, but he'll have to stay on the other side of the park and not near the soccer field — technically, the players can't be there before the coach gets there, for legal reasons." I was incredulous.⁷ My kid is old enough to drive himself to soccer practice, but he's not allowed to wait in the park from 4:30 to 5 by himself? My husband went on to explain that, in fact, the coach is not supposed to allow any players under 18 even to go to the bathroom by themselves. They're supposed to use the buddy system. Now, my son is 6-foot-2 and 220 pounds, and he's willing to assume the risk of going to the bathroom alone. Their concern here is clearly not his safety, but their liability.

Kyle: Well, the explanation we give in the paper is in terms of what we call the "feedback loop." The idea is that something (probably the availability heuristic) increased perceptions of risk to the point that a social norm against leaving children alone emerged. But once that norm was in place, moral outrage at those who violate the norm and inflated estimates of risk started reinforcing one another. That is, people increase their estimates of risk to better justify or rationalize the moral outrage they feel toward those who violate the norm, those higher estimates of risk provoke even more condemnation of parents who violate the norm, which elevates risk estimates still higher, and so on. That is a recipe for extremely rapid social change, and we suspect that the same feedback loop may operate in a variety of other domains.

In most of your studies, participants are evaluating a mother who leaves her child unattended. But in one study you instead consider fathers, and you find an interesting difference. For mothers, leaving a child unattended to go to work is about as bad as doing so to relax or to volunteer. But for fathers, leaving a child to go to work is comparable to leaving a child alone unintentionally — the case that was judged least morally bad and least dangerous. What do you think might explain this difference for mothers versus fathers?

5. a method of learning or discovery

6. the state of being responsible for something, especially by law

7. **Incredulous** (*adjective*): unwilling or unable to believe something

Ashley: Yes, it's a small difference (statistically speaking) but an intriguing one. I think people still (unfortunately) believe, explicitly or implicitly, that when a father leaves home to do paid work, he is taking care of his child by doing that. Whereas when a mother does the same thing, she is seen as abandoning her child to pursue her own interests. The mother's paid work is seen as morally objectionable and thus as endangering the child, whereas the father's paid work is not. Having said that, we didn't explore this gender effect in any depth; we would want to replicate the finding at least once or twice before putting a lot of emphasis on it.

[35] **Kyle:** My own suspicion is just a little bit different. Instead of seeing the father as taking care of the kid, just in a different way, I think subjects see work as more of an obligation for men than women. So people are in effect treating a woman's decision to leave a child for work-related reasons as more voluntary than a man's, that is, more as something that she did not "have" to do.

What do you think developmental psychology⁸ can contribute to the debate over free-range parenting?⁹

Ashley: I think that developmental psychologists need to start talking about the costs of never allowing children to take a risk. People seem to make this calculation where they say: "Well, even though the chances of anything bad happening are small, there's no harm in keeping an eye on the kids." I think what developmental psychologists can say is: That's mistaken — there is real harm in keeping an eye on the kids, if you're keeping an eye on them every minute of every day. You know, psychologists study this thing called "self-efficacy" — it refers to a person's confidence in their own ability to handle whatever comes up and succeed in a variety of situations, and it's really important. But if kids are never allowed to take any risks or have any independence at all, they can't develop self-efficacy. They can't become adults who are ready to deal with problems and navigate the world.

Barbara: Exactly. For example, last summer my younger son (then 10) went to a half-day archery camp about a mile from our house. He rode his bike to and from the camp, and it was a really great experience for him. One day when he got home, he told me with great pride that his bike had broken, but he had fixed it. What happened was this: As he started climbing the steep hill home from camp, he downshifted too quickly and the chain fell off the bike. He said he thought about going back to the camp to borrow a counselor's cellphone to call me, "But then I thought that even if you drove there, my bike wouldn't fit in the car, so we would still need a way to get the bike home." So he turned the bike upside-down, looked at it for a long time, and figured out how to put the chain back on. And then he rode the bike home. He was really, really proud of himself, and I was really proud of him, too. This summer, he signed up for the same camp and was planning to ride his bike again. But he couldn't because this year, new camp rules say that kids under 12 have to be dropped off and picked up by a parent. I think that's a shame. It's really a lost opportunity to develop a little independence and responsibility.

8. the branch of psychology that studies the psychological growth of individuals

9. a parenting style in which parents allow their children to move about without constant adult supervision

Here's an analogy: Imagine that parents suddenly have a phobia that their children are going to fall down and hit their heads and die while walking, running, climbing or playing sports. When such an injury or death happens anywhere in the country, it is covered 24/7 by the media; shows such as CSI: Head Injury Unit and Law and Order: Running and Falling Down draw big audiences. Some parents decide that just to be on the safe side, they're going to require their kid to stay in a wheelchair all the time. Gradually this practice becomes so widespread that it becomes standard, and schools and camps start requiring all children to be in wheelchairs at all times for safety reasons. Eventually, it becomes so unusual to see a child not in a wheelchair that people start calling the police when they see a child walking around, and parents are charged with criminal negligence for allowing their child to take such risks.

- [40] Reading this, you're probably thinking that eliminating the risk of these injuries does not justify the sacrifice of kids' mobility and independence and healthy development. We understand that kids need to walk and run and climb and jump and play in order to grow up healthy and strong, even though all of those activities involve some physical risk. Developmental psychologists need to do a better job of explaining to policymakers and parents that healthy psychological development, just like healthy physical development, involves some amount of risk.

Children need to explore and experiment and be on their own sometimes in order to develop independence and responsibility and self-efficacy. By keeping them under our direct supervision at all times, we sacrifice that, and we narrow their world in profound ways. Each kid is different, of course, and the people best qualified to decide how much responsibility and independence any given child can handle are that child's parents. Parents' rights to make these decisions should be respected unless there is a clear, immediate and significant risk to the child's safety.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What are TWO main ideas in the text?
 - A. Children are becoming more dependent on their parents because they are not allowed to take risks or be unattended.
 - B. Parents are often legally punished and socially shamed when they put their children in situations that bystanders deem risky.
 - C. Media has encouraged people to shame women more often than men for leaving their children unattended.
 - D. Bystanders or government agencies should have no say in how parents treat their children, as parents know their children best.
 - E. What have come to be viewed as risky situations have evolved from a changing moral perception about those situations.
 - F. Most parents unintentionally put their children in risky situations or leave them unattended, despite their shaming of other parents for the same.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answers to Part A?
 - A. "But when the girl mentioned to an adult in the park that her mother was at work, the adult called the police, who arrested and jailed Harrell and put the daughter in state custody." (Paragraph 17)
 - B. "Right now, in many situations, if a social worker or police officer thinks the child is in danger, they can intervene and take the child, arrest the parents, etc." (Paragraph 27)
 - C. "For example, I was in Norway earlier this year and people left buggies/strollers with infants outside of stores while they went inside to get coffee or have lunch with a friend. You never see this in the states." (Paragraph 30)
 - D. "My husband went on to explain that, in fact, the coach is not supposed to allow any players under 18 even to go to the bathroom by themselves. They're supposed to use the buddy system." (Paragraph 31)
 - E. "The idea is that something...increased perceptions of risk to the point that a social norm against leaving children alone emerged. But once that norm was in place, moral outrage at those who violate the norm and inflated estimates of risk started reinforcing one another." (Paragraph 32)
 - F. "So people are in effect treating a woman's decision to leave a child for work-related reasons as more voluntary than a man's, that is, more as something that she did not 'have' to do." (Paragraph 35)

3. How is paragraph 39 effective in helping the speaker make her argument?
 - A. It provides an exaggerated example of the speaker's argument that helps get her point across.
 - B. It helps readers understand how the media has contributed to the risks that parents perceive.
 - C. It makes fun of parents who are overbearing or overprotective of their children and their safety.
 - D. It provides an example of how children would be disadvantaged by their parents' concern for their safety.

4. Which of the following describes the purpose of the three researchers' experiment?
- A. to change the way that parents raise their children
 - B. to explore what contributes to people's judgment of "risky" situations
 - C. to determine what is a truly risky situation for a child to be in
 - D. to help bystanders evaluate the real risk of a situation
5. Explain the relationship between real risk and moral judgment in the text. Cite evidence from the text in your response.
