

LENORE SKENAZY

FREE-RANGE

Kids

SECOND EDITION

**HOW PARENTS AND TEACHERS
CAN LET GO AND LET GROW**

JB JOSSEY-BASS™
A Wiley Brand

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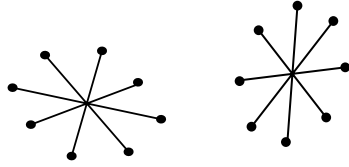
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Calling All Educators

*What Happens at School Doesn't
Stay at School*

In his forties, Michael Hynes went back to school—way back. When he became superintendent of the middle-class Patchogue-Medford School District about ninety minutes outside of New York City, he spent a day shadowing one kid in every single grade, K-12.

“I didn’t take the bus – I wasn’t that dumb,” he chuckles. “I’d meet them when they came off the bus, then we’d enter together. I dressed like a student. It was great! If they were taking a test, I’d take the test. When they ate, I ate. I followed everything and learned a lot.”

Such as?

“I got to see how the policies actually affect the schools. You’d hear urban legends, ‘Second grade recess was cut in half for more academics’—and you’d see it in real time.” One shock was realizing that the standard thirty-minute recess was really just twenty minutes, thanks to all the time spent lining up. Hynes’ other shock? He loved the teachers, but nonetheless was so antsy and bored in class he was ready to jump out of his skin. “If I was a student now, I would probably be labeled ADHD.”

So he made some changes. He doubled recess time. And lunch time. He created a quiet, attractive room where kids could chill if they needed a break. He brought in yoga. And he brought in . . . me.

He'd read this book, including the chapter on The Free-Range Kids Project. And he'd read the book you should read the minute you finish this one, *Free to Learn*, by the guy I steal most of "my" play insights from, Dr. Peter Gray, whom you've met before in these pages.

Between my book's push for more independence and Gray's push for more free play, Hynes decided to have his schools do both of Let Grow's K-8 initiatives, The Let Grow Play Club, and The Let Grow Project. Yes, the same project I called The Free-Range Kids back in Commandment 10, with some new twists.

The Play Club is Gray's idea. (See? Stealing away.) A school stays open before or after school for mixed-age, device-free, kid-led free play. There's an adult or adults on the premises—I picture someone crouching in the corner with an Epi pen—but they don't organize the games or solve the spats. They're there for emergencies only, like the lifeguards at a pool.

I visited Play Clubs at two of Hynes' schools, and I also visited several schools doing The Let Grow Project in Hynes' district and beyond. These next few pages may feel like an infomercial, but since both these programs and all the materials on how to start and run them are free, it's not like I am trying to get you to make 1,327 monthly payments of just \$19.99. That's right! Just \$19.99 a month . . . that no one has to pay.

At the first Let Grow Play Club I visited, about 100 elementary school kids were whizzing around. Hynes said he'd had no idea that the club would be popular, but in fact demand was so great that the school had to start a waiting list. If you got a chance to attend Play Club in the fall semester, someone else got to attend in the spring. That may be the saddest possible commentary on our culture: A waiting list—for play time.

Anyway, this particular school, Tremont Elementary, held its Play Club one morning a week, and I was escorted outside to see it by the enthusiastic principal, Lori Koerner. “Initially, I was a little nervous,” she admitted. But she let the scene speak for itself.

About a dozen kids were building a wall with upside down plastic buckets. When it got taller than they were, everyone would shout, “5, 4, 3, 2, 1!” and knock it down. TOTAL FUN.

A group of boys, meanwhile, was playing football, and three fifth-grade girls were playing mommy with a kindergarten girl. Another group of kids had created an obstacle course that involved running, jumping rope, and then dropping a ball from the balcony that someone below had to catch in a box.

In other words, everyone was doing their own thing, including the four teachers who were hanging out and not interfering. When I pulled aside some kids to ask why they liked Play Club, one of the boys—a third or fourth grader with a buzz cut—said casually, “Well, until Play Club, I didn’t really have friends.”

Gotta pause here.

There are a lot of other things kids get from Play Club and we’re going to talk about them. But making friends? That’s not a side benefit. That’s a life-changer.

As for those three girls who’d been playing with the kindergarten, they had taken her around and introduced her to lots of the other kids. This was probably life-changing, too, though the girls didn’t know it. Afterward, one teacher told me that that kindergarten girl was in a “self-contained” classroom—a special needs class. That meant she hadn’t had a chance to meet a lot of the other kids, even fellow kindergarteners. Till now.

And as much as that morning was a dream come true for that little girl, a study of the Play Club by Long Island University Professors Heather Macpherson Parrott and Lynn E. Cohen found that this kind of fun was no less important for the older kids. The fourth and fifth graders said they liked things like finding a kid who was alone and bored, and they’d start playing tag with her. They liked teaching the little kids a game. They liked helping

out, too. What they were experiencing—and loving—was something the Social–Emotional Learning curriculums work hard on developing: Empathy.

Except that through play, it just comes naturally, once the kids are in mixed age groups. Is it possible that these days we have to buckle down and teach Social–Emotional Learning in the classroom in part because kids get so few chances to develop their “SEL” skills organically?

That’s pretty much Gray’s big point. “Until very recent times, during all of human history with the exception of times of child slavery or intense child labor,” he says, “children always spent enormous amounts of time playing and exploring with other children away from adults. And they did it in mixed age groups.” The younger ones had the older ones as role models. For instance, Gray says, a group of seven-year-olds can’t play cards together. The game falls apart. But if the seven-year-olds are playing with nine- and ten-year-olds, it works. The older kids say things like, “Hey, hold your cards up—we can see everything in your hand!” And, “Wait your turn!” And, “Don’t throw out your queen!” The seven-year-olds, desperate to look smart and cool like the older kids, pay attention and absorb the lessons.

Those aren’t just lessons in how to play Hearts or War. They’re lessons in how to pay attention, be part of a group, get along, and, most importantly, how not to be a baby. It’s a master class in executive function, and it’s best taught by nine-year-olds having fun.

Those older kids, meanwhile, are absorbing lessons by teaching the seven-year-olds. They’re learning patience. They’re learning leadership. They’re developing communication skills by explaining the game. (If you really want to learn something, teach it—right?) And they’re learning what it means to be the grown-ups in the group—the first stirrings of maturity.

The problem is, there just aren’t a lot of opportunities for mixed-age play anymore. Most families are pretty small, so there isn’t usually a built-in play group of available children. What’s more, lots of times the extended family is extended all

the way across the country, so cousins can't gather for regular birthdays and barbecues. We've just spent a whole book discussing how come neighborhood kids don't spontaneously meet up at the park. And the afterschool games that they do play—soccer, football—are usually in leagues run by adults and segregated by age.

When you're in a group of kids your exact age, Gray says, all you can do is compete: Who is the best twelve-year-old ball player? But when a twelve-year-old is pitching to a six-year-old, he throws gently—because what's the point of whupping a little kid? In that gentleness lies the germ of compassion.

Play Club, with its mix of ages and absence of adult suggestions and interventions, lets kids do what I believe nature intended, which is to figure out how to make friends, have fun, and keep it going. And especially for a kid who hates school, or is unpopular, the Club can be a godsend. Imagine the eight-year-old who's kind of awkward or maybe even disliked. At Play Club he gives the five-year-olds piggyback rides. Now, in the halls, the kindergarteners excitedly shout, "There's Hector! Hi Hector!"

The school day—possibly the school experience—has changed for Hector.

The Play Club works in wealthy neighborhoods and in struggling, even dangerous, ones because the kids don't have to go anywhere. They're already on the premises. And it's not a big expense. Kevin Stinehart is a fourth-grade teacher in Pickens, SC, at a Title 1 school. Title 1 "means we have a high amount of poverty," he says. He attended a conference of the US Play Coalition at Clemson University, not too far from his school, and decided to try a small Play Club, once a week.

"It was incredibly easy to start," Stinehart says. The school already offered other after-school extracurriculars, like the garden club (which he'd also started), so he just added Play Club to the options. It requires "zero budget, zero preparation—we literally just show up," says Stinehart. "The kids eat their snack and go play. It could not be easier."

Some other teachers volunteered to supervise (this can, of course, be a paid gig for teachers or any other adults, or even high school students, depending on your school). And he's done some of the supervising himself. The hardest part, he says, is that some teachers are still in "recess mode," ready to step in. But Play Club is different, looser. "One teacher, her daughter is in Play Club and the girl started spinning on her stomach on the swing and the mom said, 'I would never let her do that at recess! I'm having such a hard time not interfering.'" But mom held back and her daughter had a great time.

What about arguments, and bullying? "There have been conflicts," Stinehart admits. "But they worked them all out after the first couple weeks." It took that long for the kids to absorb the fact that, while there was an adult on the premises, the kids really were in charge. "I don't think they believed me at first when I said, 'You have to pretend like I'm not here,'" says Stinehart. "They were still like, 'He took the ball!'"

But then . . . the transformation began.

One day, for example, the kids made a giant pile of leaves and took turns jumping into it. At one point, "One of the boys sat down directly in the pile," says Stinehart. "The other kids yelled, 'GET OUT OF THE WAY!' and he just acted like he didn't hear them and it was clear he was instigating this thing. But then they decided, 'All right, just jump around him.' And he got bored and left."

Ladies and gentlemen, that is the power of play. The boy learned a lesson—being a jerk doesn't make life any better—and the kids learned a lesson, too: How to solve a problem themselves. First, they figured out that all the kid wanted was attention (though they might not have articulated it that way). And then they adjusted their behavior to deprive him of it by playing without him. What an elegant solution!

Now what would have happened if an adult intervened? The "bad" kid would have gotten the attention he craved. And the other kids would have been passive, waiting for the grownup to

solve the problem—which, as we’ve seen, is itself a problem. You get confidence from doing things, not from having someone else do them for you. So an adult “fixing” the situation would have meant no creativity activated, strategies tested, or solution devised. As Gray likes to say: When adults and kids are together, the adults are the adults and the kids are the kids. It’s only when the adults *aren’t* around (or at least aren’t intervening) that the kids become the adults.

We want that to happen, right? We want kids to be engaged, excited, innovative, evolving. That means we have to start looking at play differently, and anyone “supervising” Play Club gets that amazing opportunity. Often when adults watch kids playing, it doesn’t look like fun at all. The kids are being aggressive, upset, they’re yelling—it’s a mess, just like that kid ruining the fun in the leaf pile. That’s why we adults intervene. It doesn’t look like kids are playing. It looks like they are having a terrible time.

What we forget is that a lot of playtime is spent getting TO the fun, or getting BACK to the fun, because someone or something screwed it up. One time my friend’s ten-year-old son had been at the park for two hours and his dad said, “OK, it’s time to go home.” “But dad!” the boy cried. “We’re just about to start a war!”

In other words, two full hours had been spent on negotiations. If my friend had stepped in, he may well have been able to get the “war” going in record time: “Count off by twos! Team A, your jail is the slide. Team B, your jail is the shed. The war begins when I shout, ‘Go!’ If anyone’s cheating, I’ll give them a time out.”

Adults can be very good at getting a game going. And since, to the adult, that is the whole point, why not cut to the chase?

Because, in fact, that is not the whole point. The point may *seem* to be for the kids to have fun. But developmentally it’s really for the kids to learn how to live and deal with others. Penny Wilson, a Playworker in England (real job!), calls fun the “orgasm” of play. Fun is such a fantastic, mind-blowing thing, that kids

will work really hard to get to the point where they're having it. As hard as you'd work for . . . Well, anyway. It is all that hard work—the compromising, deal-making, anger-managing, and trust-building—that makes play so enriching.

Mother Nature installed the “play drive” in kids for the same reason she installed the sex drive that will kick in a little later. It gets us doing what we need to do for the species to survive.

Not that I'd necessarily put it that way if you are talking to your local school board about starting a Let Grow Play Club.

OK, how about The Let Grow Project? You'll recall from earlier in this book (and earlier in this century) when it used to be called The Free-Range Kids Project, we're talking about a “homework” or extra credit assignment a teacher gives that is simply this: “Go home and do something new, on your own, without your parents.”

When Joanna Drusin invented this project, it was a one-shot deal. Her sixth graders were given The Project early in the fall, they did one thing on their own, and then reflected upon the experience in an essay, video, or another medium. One of my favorite stories from back then was about a boy who decided that for his Project, he would pick up his little brother after school.

When school let out, he got on the city bus and started on his way. But as he looked out the windows. . . nothing seemed familiar. The buildings were all wrong! The bus was getting farther and farther from anything he knew! WHERE WAS HE? He was so distraught, he said, he was practically crying. But somehow he managed to hold himself in check and ask the bus driver, “Where are we going?”

“Where do you *want* to be going?” the driver replied.

The boy told him the address of his brother's school and the bus driver smiled. “Ah. You wanted the downtown bus. The is the uptown bus. But don't worry. Take this” – he handed him a paper transfer – “and walk a block over. You can catch the downtown bus there.”

Our hero did as told. He took the bus downtown, scooped up his brother, and now he was telling the story to the class. They were jeering a little: “You got on the wrong bus!” “You were almost crying in front of everyone!” but the boy did not seem fazed. “Look,” he said, opening his wallet to pull something out.

The bus transfer.

Why would he keep a memento from one of the most humiliating, scary afternoons of his life? Because here was physical proof that when the going gets rough . . . he’s going to be OK. He knows he can handle things. That transfer is his golden ticket. (And also a free, effective anxiety buster.)

I leave it to you to ponder how that afternoon would have been different if his mom had picked him up so they could go together to get his little brother.

When we re-christened the Free-Range Kids Project as The Let Grow Project a few years ago, it wasn’t just re-branding. We did a little re-tooling and, frankly, The Project is yours to re-tool, too. Some teachers now assign The Project once a month, instead of once a year. Some do it weekly. One school made the assignment time-sensitive. Students have to do something new, on their own, for at least a half hour. And while originally I’d rejected the idea of some “Projects” as just too pitifully namby-pamby—“I tried a new food,” “I set the table”—I grudgingly came around to the realization that these could be significant activities in their own right . . . so long as “Tried an olive” was not the only new thing a kid did all year. Assigning The Project as an ongoing activity means that kids can have a whole panoply of new experiences, from the granular (“Made my bed”) to the gigantic (“Took the bus to grandma’s house and learned about Peru from the guy sitting next to me.”)

The Project was born in the heart of New York City, but one day I got an email from Moscow. Moscow, Kansas, population 299. Stu Moore, the superintendent there, had read about The Let Grow Project in *School Administrator* magazine and wanted to bring it to his school.

But . . . um . . . weren't kids there pretty Free-Range already? I mean . . . 299 people in town . . . there couldn't be a whole lot of worries about, say, street crime, right? Probably not too many drive-bys?

"The article just resonated with me," Moore said when we chatted by phone. "Kids just need to have some more independence and free play time, rather than always being supervised. To use their imaginations, to grow and explore—all of those good things have gone by the wayside." The proof? "There are kids that live two blocks from school and their mom will drive them here. It's crazy." The solution, he realized, was to give the parents a little push to stop hovering quite so much, and that push was The Let Grow Project.

"It's going real well!" Moore said when I checked in with him a few months after that initial call. "I'll send you a picture of the tree." The "tree" that many schools put up is a construction paper trunk and branches, taped to the wall. It can be elaborate, it can be basic, it can be brown, blue, graceful, or squat—that's up to whoever makes it. Then, whenever a student does a Project, they write it up on a leaf-shaped piece of paper and tape it to the tree. (The Project kit includes a leaf you can photocopy and give the kids to fill out, but of course you can make your own.) Moore tends to tape the day's leaves up at lunch time, so all the kids in the cafeteria just happen to see this—and get inspired.

"They're doing everything from making their own lunch, to buying something at the store, to hosting a sleepover," he said. "I get a handful of leaves every day. I've got four or five sitting on my table right now. Let me grab them."

He did. "I made Jello and dinner'—that's a first grader. She's quite an energetic little gal. Another first grader says, 'I played in the yard and made breakfast.' These are all first graders: 'I made brownies.' 'I buckled my sister's and my car seat.'" One kid had recently saddled her own horse.

The teachers? "They're just glad to see kids doing this, because they know there's some helicoptering going on."

Yes, even in Moscow, Kansas.

Over at the Roanoke Avenue Elementary School in Riverhead, an exurb of New York City, the demographics are different. This is another Title I school. Many of the kids speak Spanish at home, and third grade teacher Gary Karlson wanted to see each and every one of them shine.

“Third grade is a time when kids generally sink or swim,” Karlson says. The shocking thing, at least to me, is that apparently the teachers and the students themselves already have an inkling of who’s going to do which. It’s a year when the academic students may cement their footing, and the kids who struggle just may start checking out. Karlson desperately didn’t want that to happen. So he gave the kids *The Let Grow Project*.

He made it optional, so at first not all the kids were doing it. But he also put his “tree” on a bulletin board in the hall, and as it filled up with Projects that students passing by could read, pretty soon everyone wanted to participate.

So the kids started to make things, bake things, lay carpet, take care of their pets. One boy, not an academic superstar, decided he would build an “amphibious vehicle” out of an old Little Tykes wagon. Each week he told his fellow students how it was going, and this was like the best storytime ever. “Did you get it to float?” “Nah. Sank again.” “What are you going to try next?”

Karlson’s classroom is on the third floor, but on mornings after they’d done their *Let Grow Projects*, he says, the kids would bound up the steps to tell him, “Mr. Karlson! I learned how to rollerskate!”

How did this change the year for the kids—and Karlson?

First of all, and most unexpectedly, Karlson says, he started getting texts from parents he’d never interacted with before. In some cases, that was because he doesn’t speak Spanish and the parents don’t speak English. But anyone can send a photo, and the proud parents (including dads) were texting him pictures of their kids using a hammer, or making tortillas. At last, here was a “homework assignment” that they could understand, and

sometimes even help with. The gulf between teacher and parent, old-timer and new immigrant, evaporated in those moments, because both were celebrating the same thing: kids thriving.

Then, too, there was the change in the kids. Most kids can thrive at school, but many don't. In part, that's because teachers are under so much pressure to have their kids do well on standardized tests that these tests (despite teachers desperately wishing otherwise) are forced to become the focus. The world narrows down to classwork and metrics.

The Let Grow Project blows the roof off the school. By giving kids back the big, wide world to explore and prove themselves in, it shows the teacher, the parents, and the students themselves that even if they're not great at math, or can't stop fidgeting, every kid has some amazing strengths. When the student talks about making his amphibious vehicle finally float, he's not the quiet kid anymore. Or the dumb kid. Or the possible drop-out in the making. To his classmates now, he's the kid with the wagon that's also a boat. To his parents, he's the kid who is suddenly reading all the time (mostly about boat-building) and doesn't hate school anymore. To his teacher, he's the kid with incredible perseverance, ingenuity, and real-world math skills.

There's a lot of talk about individualized learning these days. I'm not sure there's anything more individual than telling kids that whatever thing they choose to do on their own is valuable—something that the school now recognizes as part of their “education.” What happens outside of school doesn't STAY outside of school with The Let Grow Project. The kids have a chance to share their new experience with the teacher and class and any other students reading the leaves on the tree. This means that now, at school, people get to see who they really are. The whole child, as it were.

I was talking with an anti-poverty activist in Chicago who was explaining the saddest thing of all: why some boys join gangs. Gangs appreciate a kid's non-academic talents, she said. Is he loyal? Hardworking? Smart? Maybe he's self-disciplined enough

to stand on a freezing Chicago street corner for hours, at night? Like the rest of us, kids want to be recognized for all that they are and can be.

The Let Grow Project is not the one-stop antidote to gang recruitment. But it does give educators a window into their students' unseen talents, interests, potential, and, in turn, a way for educators to show those kids: We see you. You're the kid who babysits his grandma. You're the girl who painted her room. You're impressing us, even if you're failing English. It's not just the gangs who see you in full.

That's not nothing.

And neither is the other big benefit of pushing kids to do something new, independently: the way it attacks anxiety.

No need to harp on the rising anxiety rates again—or the fact that when kids aren't allowed to do much on their own, they miss out on the chance to conquer their fears. Let's just see what this looks like in the real world.

Jodi Maurici is a seventh-grade health teacher in Suffolk County, Long Island. (I mention Long Island so much because it's a nearby petri dish for me to visit. Also, once one school district starts doing a Let Grow initiative, often nearby districts start doing it, too, because friends a town or two away see parents bragging on Facebook and they wonder why THEIR kids aren't raking the leaves or running errands. Then they tell their school to get with the program. That's how Let Grow went viral over there.) Anyway, Maurici started assigning her kids The Let Grow Project because she'd been teaching for twenty years, "and I had never seen students this anxious."

She had them fill out a survey and one of the questions was what Let Grow Project interested them that they were a little "hesitant" to try. Actual responses:

- * I was hesitant to try walking my dog alone because I was scared that he would get loose from the leash or a scary man would take me.

- * I was afraid to climb a tree because I was scared I was going to fall and break a bone.
- * I wanted to try doing a wheelie on my bike but I was scared I might hurt myself.
- * I was afraid to try and cook because there's an open flame and I could get hurt.
- * I was hesitant to use a sharp knife as my parents had never let me before.

When I try to explain to people that childhood really has changed, I hand them these surveys and remind them that seventh graders are twelve and thirteen years old. Maybe these suburban kids seem particularly sheltered, but recall that even in tiny, rural Moscow, Kansas, the kids are being driven two blocks to school.

Kids have been “protected” from so many unlikely dangers and simple tasks that they almost seem unable to imagine doing anything that doesn't end in disaster. Really—how many dogs get off their leash? How many brownie bakers end up in the burn ward? To an anxious kid, everything physical ends in an injury, every responsibility ends in humiliation.

This was really disturbing. I went out to meet Maurici and her students. What would they be like?

My God, how I loved them! And her!

Maurici is a fitness coach in her off hours, so she's stunning. But it's her belief in her students that is off the charts. “The things that some students were not allowed to do concerned me!” she said. “Not to cut their own meat—at thirteen?” Then, too, “We have a lot of kids afraid of making a mistake. These kids make a mistake and they lose it.” She wanted her students to be well-adjusted, competent kids by the time they hit eighth grade. She knew they could do it, if only they had a push. So she assigned The Let Grow Project twenty times in the year.

I met the kids in the spring, close to the end of school, and hearing the stories they told unselfconsciously was like watching time-lapse photography of flowers opening.

“I didn’t have any reason to be nervous, but for some reason my parents, like, they kind of imposed it on my life that I should be scared,” said one girl we’ll call Ella. But when she brought home the assignment—“Do something new, on your own”—they agreed to let her walk home from her sister’s soccer game unaccompanied. “It gave them a little chance to see, ‘Wow, my child can do this and I think it’s time for us to let go a little bit,’” Ella says.

After that, they started letting Ella walk to other places, including to church. When she did that, she said, “I felt overwhelmed with a sense of pride because I walked there and prayed and did everything by myself.”

After that, the changes came thick and fast. Ella got her ears pierced. She tried out for the swim team and made it (first team she was ever on). But maybe the biggest change occurred in her relationships at home. “Before, I felt like I was being treated younger than I was. I felt disrespected. But when this came on, I felt a new sense of independence.” With her new maturity, said Ella, “I realized what my parents were going through and how hard it was—all the difficulties of adulthood and everything they have to do, and the fact they have to take us everywhere and do all these things for us. I think I could appreciate that a lot more after this. And that strengthened our relationship. Me and my parents are a lot closer because of this.”

Mic drop.

But other kids’ experiences gave me chills, too. A twelve-year-old girl we’ll call—heck—Zorayah explained how nervous she’d felt talking to almost anyone. “I am not one to go out of my comfort zone. I am quiet. I don’t like to talk to people.” So her first project was not to start chatting with strangers on the street. It was simply to make breakfast for the whole family—a task she studied on YouTube until she felt, “OK, I think I can do this. It’s time for me to cook on my own.” Result? “It was so fun. I found out I love cooking!”

Then she tried rock climbing—also “really fun.” And then there came the most special Project of all. Her parents had

to leave the house early one morning, so they left Zorayah in charge of everything, including her little sister. Zorayah made her sister breakfast, helped her with her backpack, locked up the house, and took her to the bus stop. When she put her sister on the bus, a strange feeling engulfed Zorayah and she found herself almost in tears. “I thought, ‘Wow, this is crazy.’ But in the moment when I saw her get on the bus and driving away, waving, I felt really important to her. Really important to someone.”

Why we deprive kids of that feeling, I don’t know.

So many of the kids had stories of stunning transformation. A boy who’d been afraid of Disney rides knew he’d need something to write about on his Let Grow leaf when he came back from vacation, so forced himself to go on the Slinky Dog ride. Loved it! Then he went on a lot more.

A boy who’d already mastered baking cookies decided to make an entire meal like his father did: burgers, salad, and Key lime pie for the whole family. “It felt like a tradition.”

Maria Hernandez, an aide who works with the special needs middle schoolers, had Let Grow Project stories to share, too. She said one of her students, a boy with oppositional defiance disorder, also cooked a meal: pancakes and eggs—and he set the table, too. Before The Project, she says, “He used to refuse to work, and in order to make him work, you had to give him any kind of surprise. He loves Jolly Ranchers. But he’s becoming more comfortable doing things by himself.” Meanwhile, a girl with a form of Down Syndrome folded the laundry and loaded the dishwasher, which made her very proud because before The Project, she wasn’t allowed to touch the knives.

Her special needs kids get The Let Grow Project like everyone else in their grade, says Hernandez. “And they say, ‘Mom, I’ve got to do this but I want to do it by myself. I just want to try it.’” And then they do.

“It’s gone from an assignment to a way of life,” says Maurici of the entire cohort. “These are kids that really need confidence,

and you can't get confidence until you see success. And there's not success until you *do* it. So it really is a snowball effect."

The fall after Maurici's first class of Let Grow kids had graduated and moved on to eighth grade, she got a message from one of them. This is the text she sent me:

"I'm crying right now. One of my students from last year told me that thanks to The Let Grow and my support, he was able to stop taking his anxiety meds."

Let's just end this chapter there.

Oh wait! I do have a request. If a kid gets off his meds, or starts to love school, or blossoms in some gorgeous, amazing way you truly could not have predicted, I would really love to know. Drop me a note at Lenore@FreeRangeKids.com.

And I'll write back a thank you for being an educator.

REAL WORLD

This poem was written by sixth grader Rachel Lapidés after she did her Free-Range Kids Project, which is now The Let Grow Project, which is transformative no matter what you call it. When I tracked Rachel down to see if I could put her poem here, she said yes—obviously—and told me she's now a sophomore at Swarthmore, majoring in English. (I think I could have guessed!)

Discovering My Neighborhood

I walked down the stairs, past the maples.

Reds

Yellows

Even

Greens still remain.

Contrasting with the many bare trees.

Cabbage—purple and white.

(Continued)

(Continued)

More cabbage.

Flowers, bare trees and bikes strapped to poles.

I walk. Turn onto another street.

The trees are so pretty!

Rite Aid. Street poles. I turn left. Really quiet.

More trees.

More cabbage.

Why is there so much cabbage in this neighborhood?

Motorcycles. Garbage. Filth.

More cabbage. A Starbucks!

Life seems so fun when you're doing stuff by yourself and it's something new.

Red light. Evil buses! Polluting cars! Hurry up, you who kill the environment.

T-Mobile, Dunkin Donuts, I buy a chocolate chip cookie.

When I leave, the weather outside is so beautiful and crisp, I feel so grateful to be alive. It is really nice to be by yourself.

"An icy wind turned my cheeks to marble." That poem really applies here.

Actually, I think I'll take "The Road Less Traveled," instead of where I've just been.

It's really nice because my parents are overprotective and they take me everywhere so I never get to fully observe my surroundings.

This experience is really important so I can understand what it's like to be independent.

I think I'm lost.

Cross your fingers.

No! I'm not! I see a familiar florist, which reminds me I should get something for my mother. A carnation.

I'm almost home. And I'm satisfied. I'm a stomach one cookie fuller, a hand one flower heavier and mind one idea bigger—life is fun—even without your parents!

And I enter my apartment building.

Going Free-Range

Free-Range Baby Step: Have your students read, or read to them, one of your favorite books from when you were their age, about a kid who does something brave. (Hint: That is most children's books.) Think about why we love those stories so much.



Free-Range Brave Step: Ask the parents at back-to-school night to think about something they did as kids that they really loved ... that they don't let their own kids do. Mention that when we try to give our kids the best of everything but skip the thing we loved most, something is off.

Giant Leap for Free-Range Kind: Start a Let Grow Play Club and/or have your students do The Let Grow Project. And don't forget to write to tell me how it goes. You can get a free guide for The Project, the Play Club, or both by going to LetGrow.org/schoolprograms.

And by the Way: At the end of the book I'm putting the link for an Educator Discussion Guide. Discuss!

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