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## **How Dangerous Is Childhood?**

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Adam Walsh's childhood wasn't the only one that ended 25 years ago.

Childhood - and parenthood - would never be the same.

On Aug. 10, 1981, the severed head of the South Florida boy was found in a canal in Vero Beach.

If a 6-year-old could be taken from a mall after being out of his mother's sight for just minutes; if he could be murdered and decapitated; if his killer could elude authorities, then our world must be a truly dangerous place for children.

It's an understandable response to what was surely one of the most horrific crimes of the 20th century.

But the fallout - a culture of parental paranoia that has become the norm today - may be just as tragic.

The casualties, beyond the death of one innocent little boy, are many:

The death of simple childhood pleasures.  
The death of peace of mind.  
The death of common sense.  
The death of self-sufficiency.

Just last month: "FLORIDA PARENTS FEEL THE WORLD IS GETTING RISKIER FOR THEIR CHILDREN" bellowed a press release on the Web site of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, one of the organizations formed in the wake of the Walsh murder.

But how dangerous is childhood?  
And just as important, how dangerous is the pervasive belief that childhood is dangerous?

In our effort to protect children from even the most remote chance that they might be harmed, in teaching them that danger lurks around every corner, have we reared a

generation of overly fearful young adults, emotionally tethered to their parents and seemingly incapable even of walking across a college campus without holding someone's hand via cellphone?

Of course, not every woe in the overparenting saga can be traced to Adam Walsh's tragic death. Sharing the blame: The relatively new tendency to focus on and over-analyze kids, and a social sea change that has devalued self-reliance and resilience and encouraged everyone to see themselves as victims of something.

But there's no doubt parenthood has changed dramatically in the past 25 years, and little Adam's murder was among the first turns of the screw.

The CNN factor

For one thing, we simply heard about Adam Walsh.

Again and again and again.

With CNN's launch in 1980, stories that would have been updated once a day on the inside pages of a newspaper are now revisited endlessly in the 24-hour news cycle.

Remember Jamie Bulger, the 2-year-old British boy murdered by two 10-year-old boys? The case "had a major impact on parents" even a year later, writes Frank Furedi in "Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May Be Best for Your Child." "In a survey of 1,000 parents . . . 97 percent cited the possible abduction of their children as their greatest fear."

The reason: "Many of these parents revealed that 'video images of the 2-year-old being taken by his killers were still fresh in their minds.' "

Relentless exposure erodes our ability to see the incident for what it is: A tragic but extremely rare occurrence. Instead, we think every child might be the next Adam Walsh, or Polly Klaas, or Jessica Lunsford, or Carlie Brucia, or Samantha Runnion.

"Because of news patterns, if a kid is abducted in California, you start locking your doors in New Jersey," says Peter Stearns, a professor at George Mason University and author of "Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America."

"We lose our ability to say, 'Yeah, but that happened 3,000 miles away.' "

The real statistics

Child abduction is the airplane crash of parental fears.

Intellectually, we know the odds: The chances of dying aboard a plane are slim (Lifetime odds: 1 in 500,000, and that's for frequent fliers). But emotionally, we aren't convinced. Flying scares us.

The difference, though: Despite our fears, we continue to fly. To refuse to board a plane would be to condemn ourselves to a limited life.

But we think nothing of limiting our children's lives, based on fears that are even less likely to be realized.

As most people know by now, the majority of child abductions are custody related. There are also thousands of "lesser" nonfamily abductions, which "do not involve elements of the extremely alarming kind of crime that parents and reporters have in mind," according to a 2002 U.S. Department of Justice report. Examples included in the report: a 17-year-old girl held in her ex-boyfriend's car for four hours; a 14-year-old boy held at gunpoint by a man who accused him of hunting on his property; a 15-year-old girl forced into the boy's bathroom at school and sexually assaulted.

Not happy scenarios, but not Lifetime television special material, either.

But how common are what the Justice Department calls "stereotypical" abductions, the nightmare-caliber crime involving a stranger or slight acquaintance who whisks away a child with the intention of holding him for ransom, keeping him or killing him?

Statistics vary, but not by much. Some estimate about 40 such cases occur each year in the United States. The Justice Department report says there were 115 cases in 2002.

Either way, with 60,700,000 children 14 and under in the United States, the odds of your child being the victim of an Adam Walsh-style abduction are roughly 1 in a million.

You'd be wiser to cancel those horseback-riding lessons. Your child is more likely to be killed in an equestrian accident. (Odds in one year for people who ride horses: 1 in 297,000.) Or better yet, pull him off the football team. (Yearly odds of dying for youth football players: 1 in 78,260.) And if you really want to protect them, sell your car. (Lifetime odds of dying as a passenger: 1 in 228. Odds of dying this year alone: 1 in 17,625.)

Or, to put another spin on it, your child is 700 times more likely to get into Harvard than to be the victim of such an abduction.

Chances that the kidnapped child will be killed are smaller still. The U.S. Department of Justice says 40 percent of the 115 victims were murdered.

Horrific, yes, but "almost certain not to happen," says Stearns.

"But our emotions overwhelm our ability to calculate reality."

What we've given up

Some say that if altering our lifestyles saves even one child, those measures are worth it.

But in protecting our children from the unlikeliest of scenarios, in the vain hope that no child will ever be hurt, we are inflicting greater harm on all of them.

The casualties in this world of parental paranoia:

- Walking to school - barefoot, in the snow, and uphill both ways - used to be the norm. But so few children walk to school today - about 10 percent nationwide - that Oct. 4 has been named International Walk to School Day.

A major reason the K-8 crowd is sealed into the backs of SUVs and transported: Parental concerns about safety.

And those concerns "have as much to do with 'stranger danger' - the chance that a child walking to school will be snatched off the sidewalk by a complete stranger - as a fear of traffic," states a Salon.com article about "Safe Routes to School," an effort started several years ago to get more kids walking and biking to school.

Wendi Kallins, project manager for the Marin County, Calif., program, describes one father who attended a Safe Routes meeting: Intellectually, he understood his child was highly unlikely to meet a grisly end on the walk to school. But emotionally? "With my pretty blue-eyed daughter, I'm convinced she will be the one."

"When you're dealing with gut-level fears," Kallins is quoted as saying, "there's not much you can do.

"The whole level of fear in our culture is increasing."

And so a vicious cycle ensues: Fewer children walk, so they don't travel in the protective packs that once gave parents comfort. The increase in traffic heading to schools makes it more likely that a kid will be hit by a car, most likely driven by a parent. (Fifty percent of the children hit by cars near schools are hit by parents of other students, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.)

And kids miss a chance for exercise, social interaction and a dose of self-reliance.

- The death of play.

Much has been written about the overscheduled child and the lost art of play. Structured fun does far less to bolster creative thinking, self-sufficiency, teamwork building and social and problem-solving skills.

Almost all parents wistfully wish that their kids could experience playtime as they knew it, when children organized their own games and came home when the streetlights were turned on.

Yet no one seems willing to let their children simply go out and play. There's the fear - that word again - that kids will be left behind if they don't take part in the requisite number of classes and organized activities. There's also a hands-off approach to other people's children that didn't exist 30 years ago, so parents can no longer count on "the

village" to discipline or even keep an eye on their child. And many kids simply don't want to play outside - video games and computers are the new playgrounds of choice.

But a 2001 Time magazine article quotes a Sarasota mom who sums up many parents' sentiments: Unsupervised play is also dangerous.

She lives next door to a park, but her children aren't allowed to play there. She has heard that people expose themselves there.

"It used to be that in the presence of one another, kids formed a critical mass to keep each other safe," says Roger Hart, a psychologist at City University of New York. "Gone are the days when children make any of their own plans."

- The death of trust.

As children have been trained to look out for menacing strangers, adults have learned to fear false accusations. The fallout: teachers cautioned to never touch a child, Scout troops unable to find male leaders and men who must think twice before interacting with any child who isn't his own.

A New York writer shares his story: "A new child molester is roaming South Queens, N.Y. - me!"

He tells of walking behind an 11-year-old girl who kept nervously looking over her shoulder at him.

"When I sought to comfort her with a kindly smile, she became even more alarmed."

The story continues: "I wasn't some stranger cruising the neighborhood (didn't a man once have the right to walk any street in America?)." Turns out, his son attends the girl's school.

He didn't think about the girl until a few days later, when a letter went home to parents, describing the "incident."

The child's report: "While on my way to school I saw a man following me. I looked back and he smiled and nodded his head." The girl went into a drugstore, notified a security guard, and received a police escort to school.

Better safe than sorry? Maybe. But has this girl been trained to be cautious, or to be fearful? Will she grow into a young woman too timid to take a solo rail trip across Europe, drive herself across Route 66, or simply to walk through life taking pleasure in her own company, secure in her own good judgment?

- The death of self-sufficiency.

On college campuses, our culture of fear is coming home to roost. We've reared a generation denied the chance to play or to simply walk to school, protected from all failure and risk, and taught that the world is a very dangerous place.

Now, they're struggling to grow up.

Talk to any professor, any college administrator, and hear tales of comically overprotective "helicopter" parents and students tethered to their mothers via thrice-daily cellphone calls. And when they graduate? The "boomerang generation" goes right back home to mom and dad.

Not all of this is rooted in fear of physical harm, of course. But there's no doubt that a lifetime of protection from both menacing strangers and life's regular bumps and bruises has left its legacy.

"With few challenges all their own, kids are unable to forge their creative adaptations to the normal vicissitudes of life," an article in *Psychology Today* states. "That not only makes them risk-averse, it makes them psychologically fragile, riddled with anxiety. In the process they're robbed of identity, meaning and a sense of accomplishment, to say nothing of a shot at real happiness.

"Whether we want to or not, we're on our way to creating a nation of wimps."

- The death of common sense.

The culture of fear, as every parent knows, is not limited to "stranger danger."

On the Web site Kids in Danger (the site's icon: the ominous opened safety pin from diapers of yore!) parents can read about the perils inherent in high chairs, "soft bedding," strollers, swings, cribs, etc. They can peruse a 44-page report on Baby Bath Seats/Rings.

They can bone up on the common childhood menace, toys: "Meant to provide joy and entertainment, toys, however, are linked to all-too-many injuries."

Provided they survive their toys, the well-parented child emerges, perpetually helmeted, into a world of car seats, padded playgrounds, sanitary hand gel, compulsive sunscreen applications, nut-free classrooms, sugar-free birthday parties, cell-phones-as-umbilical-cords . . .

And paranoia:

Furedi, the British author, points to the ban on small plastic prizes from children's snacks. "There is no evidence that any child has ever choked to death (on a prize) - but the theoretical possibility that one just might do so one day is undeniable, and that is enough to justify a ban."

Stearns points to the alleged dangers of Halloween: the idea that within each plastic pumpkin lurks a chocolate bar injected with straight pins or razor blades.

"As far as we can determine, this never happened. But it changed the whole pattern of Halloween."

Police departments and hospitals now screen kids' candy; parents tag along for the night.

"Boy, if my parents had come along with me, I would have been furious," says Stearns. What's becoming troubling to more folks watching as the years go by: Hand-wringing parents no longer make kids roll their eyes. More kids have come to believe they need the protection. They feel inferior to the task of growing up, of making their own decisions, of trusting their own common sense.

Of ending up victims like those little kids on TV.

Actual odds of dying

In the end, though, numbers don't lie.

By all accounts, childhood is far less dangerous now than it once was, even back in those mythic, gentler times. In 1930, almost 11 percent of the population died before reaching age 20. For children born in 2000, that number will be 1.3 percent. (Most of those deaths: accidental injuries, and not, for the record, as a result of toys.)

But, as Stearns, the "Anxious Parents" author, says, "we're addicted to stuff that makes us insecure.

"It's like being mesmerized by a cobra."