

Extra-City-Kid Perception

“Free Range Kids” mom Lenore Skenazy on the things that only NYC kids notice

BY PREEVA TRAMIEL

HOW DID LENORE SKENAZY EARN THE DUBIOUS distinction of “the world’s worst mom”? Five years ago, the then-*New York Sun* columnist wrote about relenting to her child’s incessant pleas, letting the nine-year old ride the Lexington Avenue local and crosstown bus from Bloomingdale’s to their Waterside Plaza apartment by himself. Packs of over-protective parents howled on chat boards; within a week the outcry landed Skenazy and her son on the Today Show, MSNBC, Fox and NPR. Skenazy’s blog and subsequent book, *Free Range Kids*, birthed a movement that advocates for today’s city kids to have as much freedom as their Boomer grandparents once had.

If Skenazy appears out of step in this Internet-enforced golden era of helicopter parenting, her views are in line with psychologists. Developmental scientists urge letting children do what they can do instead of doing it for them. And while some feel New York holds special dangers, the city’s Department of Education doesn’t share many parents’ horror of kids fending for themselves on subways and buses—children as young as five who live far from school or a bus route can get transit passes.

We caught up with Skenazy, who clearly doesn’t mind being a magnet for outrage.

Scooter: Why are parents so much more protective now than in the ‘50s?

Lenore Skenazy: This is one of the safest times in history, but parents are afraid. The media amplifies any tragedy way out of proportion. News coverage on kidnappings and murders has gone up, but the actual number of murders is going down.

Fear is also a great way to sell things. There’s one commercial: Danny disappears, and the big voice continues: “Where’s Danny? Imagine if he’d actually been abducted!” Very frightening. But we’re actually being told to imagine this scenario. We’re being instructed to panic.

Scooter: For \$20, you can put an RFID chip in anything—if we track our phones and computers, why not our kids? Kids sometimes lie about their whereabouts. Isn’t it good for parents to know what they are really doing?

LS: Our kids do not deserve to be treated like parolees with motion tracking ankle bracelets. Acting as if they are in danger every second is a new and truly paranoid method of parenting. Not trusting your child at all—as they simply go about their day—is not only unnecessary, it’s undermining.

Scooter: What do you think New York City kids pick up just by being city kids?

LS: They understand public transportation. They can get



anywhere they want because they don’t have to wait for a parent to drive them.

And they’re not spooked by crowds. City kids are used to crowds—in fact, they see safety in crowds. After school my kids would sometimes get a group together to go to the movies.

And they are way ahead of the game when it comes to accepting diversity. They don’t think that the world is any other way.

Scooter: At the NEST+m school, one sixth grade teacher gives extra credit to students who complete a “Free Range Kids” assignment. What are some of those?

LS: One kid asked her mom if she could knock on all the doors of the other apartments on their floor in a Battery Park City apartment building. Her mom said no, because who knows if one of those strangers is a danger! But then the kid—she’s so smart, NEST+ is a magnet school after all—said, “But mom, what if there’s a fire? Don’t you want them to know they should come looking for me?” The mom was torn—*Predators! Fire! Predators! Fire!* Both seemed so terrifying. Then her daughter reminded her: “Mom, I’ll get extra credit.” So she relented, and the kid ended up finding two other girls about her own age she hadn’t met because they attended different schools.

Another boy decided to take the bus to pick up his younger brother from school, got on the right bus going in the wrong direction, almost had a panic attack but asked the driver for help instead. The bus driver gave him a transfer, he got on the right bus and everything turned out fine. The child kept the transfer.

Scooter: He kept it?

LS: He opened up his wallet and took out the transfer to show it to everyone. It’s his golden ticket. It’s proof that if he ever wants to try anything, he can. Now he’s got that confidence that can only come from doing something on your own. Especially something that didn’t go right the first time. That you fixed. ☺