



Promoting Childhood Independence and Resilience Act

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Background

It is becoming increasingly clear that American youth are suffering from collapsing mental and physical health, in part because of screen time, and in part due to a lack of independence, responsibility, and free play. Children today experience 50% less unstructured outdoor play compared to the 1970s, as well as significant declines in in-person socialization. A 2023 [study](#) in the Journal of Pediatrics found that over the decades as children's independence declined, their anxiety and depression have increased.

So has their sedentary behavior. Generation Z faces a public health emergency. *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt, a New York Times Bestseller, made a compelling case about the “great rewiring of childhood” wherein social media, screen addiction and overprotection in the real world have interfered with children's social and neurological development. His book, as well as the nonprofit he co-founded, Let Grow, have fueled a national movement to promote a healthier, freer childhood marked by play and independent exploration. These are key development tools that help children grow into competent adults.

But across the United States, too many parents fear allowing their children to play and explore independently. This is driven in part by a remarkable culture shift from the 1980s to today. Adults are no longer used to seeing children out and about exploring the world and learning to socialize and act on their own. The media, meanwhile, pushes a fiction that children are somehow unsafe if they play outside unsupervised, even though today's children are physically safer than ever before in human history.

Restrictions on a Healthy Childhood

This culture shift has led child welfare systems to report and investigate families for allowing children to participate in independent activities that used to be the norm—activities like walking to the playground, biking around the neighborhood, or walking to the grocery store. As American children now spend an average of seven hours per day online, and as we see skyrocketing depression, lower academic performance, and increased pediatric mental health hospitalizations, the American law enforcement and child welfare systems have in some cases become punitive against parents who actually let their kids leave the house.

- In Illinois, a woman was cited for child neglect after allowing her 11, 9, and 5-year-old children to play in a park near their home.

- In Maryland, a couple was found responsible for child neglect after allowing their 10 and 6-year-old children to play outside and walk home by themselves.
- In South Carolina, a mom was arrested for allowing her 9-year-old to play at a park.
- In Virginia, CPS investigated parents who allowed their children to play outside in their yard.
- In Pennsylvania, a single mother was placed on the state's child abuse registry for having a 13-year-old babysit her one-year-old.
- In Georgia, a mother was arrested when her 10-year-old son took a walk.

There have been far too many arrests and registry placements with no actual abuse or harm for parents who are just doing the right thing—giving their children developmentally appropriate experiences that will help them grow and thrive. These cases are exacerbating an environment of increased parental fear and anxiety, and they are undermining efforts to help children get outside, socialize with other kids, and engage in physical activity.

Then there is the problem of parents without the means to “helicopter.” For instance, a mom working two shifts may know her child is mature enough to come home with a latchkey and do his homework until 5 p.m. when she returns. That’s not neglect—that’s poverty. Nationally, statistics show that 37% of all kids will be the target of a child protective services investigation by age 18. That number rises to 53% for African American children. Broader national patterns of inconsistent child welfare standards and overprotection overburden child welfare systems and further harm children. Even if parents aren’t at high risk of being reported on, they may “play it safe” and keep the kids indoors to not invite scrutiny from their neighbors in an increasingly fear- and phone-based world.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services has prioritized reducing the amount of time children spend on screens to improve public health. The alternative to screens is time spent playing, exploring, or helping out, indoors or out. Bipartisan organizations like Let Grow champion childhood and help kids build confidence, resilience, and self-reliance. Leaders like Lenore Skenazy are advancing public understanding that kids will have more freedom and health when parents don’t fear being reported. Across America, 12 states have already passed “Reasonable Childhood Independence” laws clarifying that neglect is when you put a child in obvious, likely danger—not anytime you allow them to bike around the block. These states explicitly protect families who allow children to participate in independent activities like playing outdoors with other children, babysitting younger children, going to the store, running errands, staying home alone for a reasonable period, and taking public transportation.

The Promoting Childhood Independence and Resilience Act Supports Parents

America’s children deserve more independence and less screentime. A 2025 Harris Poll asked kids themselves how they prefer to spend time with friends: In free, unstructured play, or in adult-organized activities, or online? The clear winner was free play. “Online” came in last. Oftentimes kids are on their phones because no one is letting them play outside.

Rep. Blake Moore (R-UT) and Rep. Jennifer McClellan's (D-VA) Promoting Childhood Independence and Resilience Act would underline the state efforts underway, promote a freer, healthier childhood, and support parents who are getting children off their screens and out into the real world. The bill:

- Instructs the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to conduct a public study on how states and state child welfare agencies can best empower parents to give children opportunities to participate in reasonable independent activities without direct supervision.
- Amends Title IV-B of the Social Security to encourage states to have plans in place that train child welfare staff and prevent unnecessary and traumatic investigations and separations of families solely based on allowing children to participate in reasonable independent activities.
- Amends the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to clarify that a decision by a parent or caretaker to allow a child to participate in reasonable childhood independence activities is not neglect.
- Ensures that grants to states for child abuse or neglect prevention and treatment programs can be used to 1) develop strategies and training protocols that ensure child welfare staff understand that reasonable independence activities are not exclusive grounds for charges of child abuse and neglect, and do not justify the separation of a child from their parent or guardian; and to 2) help the public better understand that a parent or guardian allowing a child to participate in reasonable independence activities is not being neglectful.
- Requires states pursuing child abuse or neglect prevention and treatment program grants to have assurances and protections for parents and legal guardians so they may allow a child to participate in reasonable independence activities without fear or threat of criminal or civil charges, hotline call investigations, other custody assessments or investigations, mandated services, child abuse registry or accusations of child abuse or neglect; and requires states to have provisions and procedures for training child protective service workers about the importance of reasonable independence activities for a child's healthy development.
- Ensures parents have the freedom to raise their children as they see best.