

Let's not lose the best part of pandemic parenting

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FULL TEXT

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The pandemic - for all its pains - has brought some children an unexpected benefit: a taste of freedom. Their freedom is new, and it is most definitely sweet. But to what degree it endures or turns bitter is an open question. The effects of pandemic parenting have changed us, broken some, and piled pressure onto mothers in particular, who have borne the brunt of extra duties and new aggravations. These are some of the immutable facts of having kids in your charge this decade, whatever your family's current state of harmony or dysfunction. A low point for my own was the breakfast-table debate - a euphemism, for sure - about whether a slightly different hue of green discharge from our daughter's perpetually runny nose indicated a symptom (existing? new? worsening?) that would necessitate pulling her out of school for a trip to the testing centre for the 20th time. The definition of insanity is a screaming argument over the colour of snot.

Prior to the pandemic, the default good parenting model was constant adult supervision combined with the scheduling of activities in every waking moment. Kids were empty vessels to be filled and shuttled to early morning practice, then to school, then to after-school programs, then home for a quick dinner, and then something else. This model was driven by relatable anxiety and good intentions but not especially associated with any evidence that it was actually good for kids, or made them happy. In fact, there is a body of research that shows that more freedom and spare time correlate to improved cognitive and emotional skills, along with better well-being for children.

What if the pandemic, as one of its cultural side effects, has softened parents and furloughed kids from their military timetables? What if the helicopter parent reached their maximum speed in early 2020 before crashing to the ground in the high-velocity winds of COVID?

There are a few forces at play here. First, many of the activities that consumed young people's early mornings, late evenings and whole weekends were interrupted, reduced or moved online. Next, some parents recognized that the constant if inconsistent throttle of COVID-related rules was choking their kids' instincts and energies. Take, for example, the list of directives during a typical day at school, where most Canadian young people have returned to spend the majority of their waking hours: wear a mask, don't talk too loudly (or at all), sit here and don't get too close, eat lunch only at this table, walk here but don't go over there with them. Go straight home after school and don't even think about using the playground or basketball court. These restrictions, whatever their effectiveness in curbing the spread of a deadly virus, are tools of oppression for controlling young bodies with a biological imperative for movement and expression.

Parents, as is their instinct, responded by pushing back to defend their children's right to freedom where they could - at home and in their social lives. (We don't mind bossing our own kids around, but woe to anyone else who tries to tell them what to do). They started letting their tweens stay out a little later with friends, or hang out longer in roving packs somewhere within the network of laneways behind their homes. For other parents, giving children more alone time and independence was a necessity, not a choice. For older adolescents who had been clamouring to make their own decisions for half their life, suddenly leaving home to wander without a set agenda was left up to them. And kids, as is their nature, saw an opening and started negotiating for more say in the co-creation of their

social and family environments. As the pandemic dragged on and family time accumulated, they were playing a greater role in all kinds of decisions. They got permission to roam further in the neighbourhood, to explore parts unknown, to finally cross the major street that tethered them before the pandemic. A bigger world opened in front of them. It felt good and empowering, and yes, risky.

The trend of parents creating the conditions for more autonomy and children embracing them is an unexpected throughline in our research at Maximum City with Canadian families about their life during the pandemic. There is a clear trend among parents to give kids more independence, along with growing recognition that it is having a positive effect on confidence and well-being. There is a loud but assured voice from young people to assert their agency, along with relishing in the limit-testing and deeper discovery that comes with it.

What we don't know is how widespread this phenomenon really is, or how much stickiness it will have. Some of these changes can simply be attributed to kids, like all of us, getting older through the slow burn of the pandemic. But more significantly, will parents eventually reel in the kite string and return young lives to their regularly overscheduled programming, particularly as vaccines make them less vulnerable? Will kids rebel against the return of determinism now that they have tasted the responsibility of making more choices? Once you start believing in your own free will, it's not something you give up without a fight.

The pandemic has been full of harsh truths and some unexpected contradictions. It is a paradox that more control at school has led to more learning and growth around the home. It would be ironic if COVID-19, known for loss and death but also for its rules and restrictions, ended up being an emancipatory and self-actualizing force in the lives of young people. Ironic, but also welcome.

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DETAILS

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