

## Lenore Skenazy-Free Range or Deranged?

for the Multitasking Moms Telesummit 4/10

*Lain:* Hi, this is Lain Ehmann with 30MinuteMartha.com, and I'm pleased to welcome everyone to the kickoff call for The Multitasking Moms Telesummit. This morning our esteemed guest is Lenore Skenazy. Lenore is a syndicated columnist, the author of *Free-Range Kids, How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry)*, and the mom of two sons. She has spoken to audiences around the world and appeared on Dr. Phil, The View, The Today Show, NPR, CNN, The BBC, and CBCN and I bet a lot more letters as well.

In addition to founding the Free-Range Kids blog, book, and movement, she has written for everyone from *The Washington Post* to *MADD Magazine*, and she's a graduate of Yale and Columbia and lives in New York City with her husband and son. She has been called 'the worst mom in America', and we are thrilled to have her with us this morning. Welcome, Lenore.

*Lenore:* I always wonder why people are thrilled to have 'the worst mom in America'. Here I am. Yes, hi.

*Lain:* According to my children, I am the 'meanest mom in America', so it's kind of a reunion of sorts. There we go. For our listeners who aren't familiar with your story and why you are called 'the worst mom in America', why don't you share just a little bit about how your book came to be and how

The Free-Range Kid Movement came to be and how you came to get that wonderful moniker?

*Lenore:* The one that will be chiseled on my tombstone...*Here she lies already. Good. Get rid of her.* What happens is about 2 years ago my son was 9 at the time and had been asking me and my husband (We live in Manhattan.) if we would please take him somewhere and let him get home by himself on the subway. He loved maps and public transportation. We live in Manhattan and so we're always on the subway and the buses. We don't even have a car.

We talked about it (my husband and I) and decided 'yeah'. He seemed ready and we were ready. We're on the subways all the time. We see them in real life. They're always crowded. There are lots of people. They're very safe and so is our city. The city is back to the crime rate of 1963. It's actually at a 50 year low in terms of murders. So we decided 'yeah.' One day my husband sat him down and showed him a map and everything which we knew he could read. We went over everything again and I took him to Bloomingdale's...like the nicest, fanciest neighborhood in New York... and said, "Okay, today's the day." I left him in the store because I wanted him to find his way out. You leave the store and you are confronted right there with the subway stuff.

Sure enough, he got on the wrong side and asked somebody if it was going downtown. The guy said he had to go to the other side and so there was a stranger confronted and successfully negotiated with. He took the subway down a couple of stops, gets out on 34<sup>th</sup> Street- which is the same

street that you see on Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street without the balloons-then he took the bus across 34<sup>th</sup> Street which ends at our apartment complex. He was so happy...almost relieved to have finally done something himself...not been treated like a baby and proved himself. We were just really happy.

I truly didn't even think about writing about it because it didn't strike me as that interesting to the general public. A couple of months later when I had a new editor who is a woman (at the newspaper I was writing for) and I was desperate for a story...I said, "You know, a couple of months ago I put my son on the subway and let him ride home alone. Since then I've talked to some other 4<sup>th</sup> grade moms who thought that was radical. Why don't I write about why I let him do it- because it was a good experience?" She said, "Sure. Write it."

I wrote it and two days later I was on all these shows. I was on the Today Show and NPR and CNN and Fox News defending my decision because everyone thought I'd put my son in grave danger... and for what? I sort of thought about it the other way around. I thought that the danger would be to not let my son do anything (especially when he and I felt he was capable) and I trusted my city and my parenting instincts. I trusted the lessons I had given him about what to do in an emergency. I gave him quarters to call home and \$20 if he had to take a cab.

It turned out there was this big divide between people who said, “Yes, why are we not letting our kids do anything we did when we were kids at that age?” versus people who thought this was insanely dangerous to the point where my children should be taken away from me. That was it.

I started the Free-Range Kids website that weekend to explain that I actually love safety and my kids think of me as a safety nut. I’m always talking about them looking both ways and waving their arms and making eye contact before they cross the street. I tell them, “You’re short and they should see you.”...car seats when they were kids and seat belts on every journey. Nobody even thinks of getting in our car without thinking they’re going to put on a seatbelt. I don’t like danger or crazy risks. I’ve never climbed a mountain. I can barely do anything but I do believe that kids are safer than the media has tried to convince us.

*Lain:* It sounds to me that it was a very calculated risk. It wasn’t like you brought your son from the rural cornfields of Iowa.

*Lenore:* *Get down off that haystack. We’re going to Manhattan and I’m putting you on the subway, Son.* No, it’s not like that.

*Lain:* It’s not like throwing the kid into the 10 foot deep waterhole with sharks.

*Lenore:* *That’ll teach them to swim.*

*Lain:* No. It was more like: *You’ve been doing this with the water wings. It’s time for you to...*

*Lenore:* Right. I think of it as the urban equivalent of: *I know you've been anxious to ride your bike to the Library and we've been doing it as a family. Today, you can go so long as you promise to get off your bike and cross the street by walking it as we discussed.* Yeah, it was all premeditated or whatever you want to say.

*Lain:* Right. Like I said...very calculated. You had taken steps up to that point so this was the next natural step for him. It was all built up and for some reason, it just tapped into something in parenting consciousness and created this huge storm. You were there and you wrote about it and everything else just kind of...

*Lenore:* Yeah, I look back and think: *Wow. I couldn't have orchestrated it to be more of a big deal if I had tried to.* The night after the column ran it was not only The Today Show who called to ask if I could come on in two days and could I bring my son and could we film in the subway (...and bigger and bigger deal), but the Howard Stern Show called that night, too. I thought: *How could one show...* There were no strippers involved in this story. Howard Stern is calling and The Today Show. That means there is some weird nerve that got hit.

I really think it must be because (as I've had time to think about this) the subways are sort of iconic just the way New York is iconic. When they show movies about the city, it's always something horrible that's happening down there. There's an explosion. There's John Travolta.

There's rats. There's a radioactive rat and now it's taking over the subway station. There's floods. It's really (because it's subterranean) hellish if you're trying to get somewhere and it's taking forever and the subway is breaking down. Generally, in real life for those of us who live here, it's a popular form of transportation that four million people take a day.

*Lain:* Right. So when you wrote your book you did quite a bit of research about safety statistics - everything from Halloween candy to child abductions. Can you summarize some of the findings in terms of safety? Obviously, you wrote a 200 page book about this...

*Lenore:* I'm happy to talk about it. If you turn on the news every night, of course, *it's if it bleeds, it leads*. They're not about to give you: *Not much happened today, so go about your dinner and tune us in tomorrow. Maybe something will have happened*. That's not a winning strategy if you want to gain viewers. There's always something horrible on the news but the great news is that we are enjoying right now a 30-year steady decline in crime- that's against kids and adults. It's national.

Crime was going up when most of us were outside playing as kids. It was going up in the 70s and 80s, but around the 90s (93-94) it turned backwards and it's been going down since then. The strange almost unbelievable truth is that if you were playing outside in the 70s or 80s, your children today are safer outside than you were. There's actually less crime. There's less murder and less rape. It's hard to believe because of

all these things I get to in the book, but also, when my parents were raising me- because I'm so old- there weren't 24/7 news cycles and there weren't 3 stations totally devoted to 24 hour news and there wasn't Law and Order and CSI and Criminal Intent and Criminal Minds and criminal disgusting, horrible, terrifying minds. There was *Marcus Welby* where the people lived or *Dallas* where the crime was hair...horrible giant hair. So today it just seems much worse than it is.

In terms of Halloween- when I talked to this guy named Joel Best who actually researched Halloween crime going back to 1958, he looked at newspapers on the date following Halloween for 1958, 1959, etc., and do you know how many kids were poisoned by strangers on Halloween?

*Lain:* I actually know the answer to this because I read the book, but I'll make an educated guess. If I had not read the book I'd have probably said 200.

*Lenore:* And the answer of course is....zero.

*Lain:* Zero.

*Lenore:* Zero children have been poisoned by a stranger's candy. What's so interesting to me about Halloween is how readily we believe the idea that some mysterious Granny is going to bake irresistible chocolate chip cookies laced with cyanide. Her eyes will widen with glee as she sees the children reaching for them knowing that she'll hopefully have a bunch of murdered dead bodies on the lawn on the morning of November 1<sup>st</sup>. What could make her happier?

Just the fact that we all take that as a given that we have to examine the Snickers and see if it looks like somebody opened it and put in the poison and then closed it again. If they were smart enough but stupid enough not to close it, then that's the candy our kids should throw out. It hasn't happened but we believe it.

What I've thought about since writing the book is that Halloween almost became the template for how we regard all of life and children now. With Halloween we started not trusting the neighbors and we started thinking they had this plan to kill our kids and that we'd better bring Halloween inside with our children. We'd better supervise it and we'd better not trust anyone. We'd better buy extra stuff because the kids can't make their own fun anymore. We'll buy decorations and send out invitations and 'Please. No scary costumes. There are small children who are coming.'

We adultified this holiday out of fear for our children's safety and I think that's the same model that we've used for the rest of the year now, too. Our kids can't make their own kickball game. We'll organize a soccer league. Our kids can't walk home. We'll drive them home. Our kids can't just play in the open lots behind our building. We'll have Gymboree. It all became supervised, corporatized, and expensive as a result of our fears. Certainly in the case of Halloween they all became absolutely baseless.

*Lain:* Right. We've talked a little bit about how media has played into that with 'if it bleeds, it leads'...Let's shock and terrorize parents because they're going to watch. Those lead-ins like: *What danger is lurking in your child's lunchbox?* Of course you're going to watch that.

*Lenore:* If there was really a danger in the kids' lunchbox...say Wonder Bread accidentally put in salmonella instead of flour in the last batch of bread they baked...Why are they making us wait until eleven o'clock? Is your bread going to kill your child? Details in 3 ½ hours! Could you tell me before dinner? Honestly, it can't be that terrible or they would be criminally negligent not to tell us.

*Lain:* I love that. So the media in terms of news has done this to us. The CSI shows, NCIS...that's contributed as well.

*Lenore:* I have this debate going on on my blog (Freerangekids.com) right now. A 16 year old girl wrote in and the headline of her letter to me and that I put in the blog was: Mom, I am not going to end up a sex slave. The mother is so afraid of her child (16 years old...in another era she'd be a mother already and holding down the fort on the prairie while her husband went and tamed the mule)...The girl is saying that her mother is so afraid of her going outside because she's watched all these shows where kids do get dragged off the playground from the bus stop or whatever. I would never say that that never happens, but it is so rare in real life and so common on TV.

What happens is when you see something horrible like that and see this story...say it's on CSI...and the girl is dragged from the bus stop and the next thing you see she's tied up in some fiend's basement and there are electrodes attached to her or whatever...your brain can go: *Oh, my gosh. I'm enjoying this because they're going to solve the murder and it'll be great*, but the pictures that end up in your brain don't end up filed under Fiction. They end up filed under: Really graphic scary image.

The way the brain works is that when you ask it a question like if it's safe for my kid to wait at the bus stop by herself. (She's 16 or whatever.) The picture that comes up is the most graphic one because that's the one that's in Technicolor. It's seared there. Your brain works like Google. Whatever comes up first on the list it assumes - wrongly- is the most common. It assumes that's what my brain is flashing on, that must be happening all the time. Even though I'm not just talking about the news, even though we have all these shows that are fiction, they do end up cluttering your mind and skewing your decisions towards the worst case scenario because that's what they show.

In the case of CSI...Mayo Clinic decided to do a study where they compared two seasons of CSI and CSI Miami crime with two seasons of the crimes committed in real life. They found three discrepancies. The first being that in real life alcoholics played a huge role...alcoholics and drugs...because when people are high they do stupid things. That counts for both victims and perpetrators. Two is that in real life minorities are way over represented as victims of crime but not on TV where the advertisers

want whites. The one that I think has changed our parenting the most is that in real life the majority of crimes against children (certainly 90% of the abuse) is committed by people the kids know...relatives, close friends of the family, people who have been around them a lot. On TV the crimes are committed by strangers which is totally unrepresentative of real life but it does make you not trust the world. It makes you think that the minute your kid walks out the door there is someone like you saw last night on CSI or Law and Order ready and lurking to pounce on your kid or searching the Internet and looking for pictures of your reunion from last summer where they see your child playing Frisbee and they decide to cross three state lines to come and get him/her. It gives you a really terrifying impression of what is out there that just happens to be exactly at odds with the truth.

*Lain:* It reminds me of how med students when they're studying all the horrible diseases get a rash on their arm. It couldn't possibly be eczema or dermatitis.

*Lenore:* It must be beriberi or 2 months to live.

*Lain:* Exactly. Like you're saying, that's the most graphic and where our mind goes.

*Lenore:* It's interesting. It's a lot more interesting than thinking: Oh, I must be allergic to Tide with Lavender, you know?

*Lain:* Exactly. So now that we know what we're facing, what are we risking as parents by giving into our fears (graphic as they may be) and the whole helicopter parenting and the cell phones and constant contact with them? What is that doing to our kids?

*Lenore:* It's making them not grow up. Let's go backwards for a second. You know my kids when they went to this really mandy-pandy baseball league that they played in for a few years...my younger son would sit in the outfield because nobody could ever in a million years hit the ball to the outfield. He would sit there and that's what he did for baseball. At the end of the 8 weeks which has already been celebrated with pictures and jerseys, everybody got a trophy including him even though I don't know that he ever hit the ball and he certainly never caught the ball.

I think the idea was without a trophy he wouldn't feel good about himself. He wouldn't think that he was a good boy and a good baseball player....which he wasn't. He was sitting there not participating and he was a terrible baseball player, but we feel like we have to give them this sense of who they are and the self esteem: You accomplished something great!...when they don't. I think we feel that lack in our kids. We know that we want them to feel better about themselves, but I think the lack comes from them literally not doing things for themselves. I think if he had spent those 8 consecutive Saturdays trying to build a target on the tree and then making little arrows out of sticks and finally hitting it, I think he would've felt way more accomplishment. He would've come up with something to do. He would've worked at getting better at it. It would've been his idea or

he and a friend. I know one of the best days of his life he came home so happy from school one day. He and his friend had played Seven Square. They didn't play Four Square because there were 7 of them and they all wanted to play and didn't they come up with their own solution? Let's play Seven Square. Who says it has to be Four Square? Well, when we're there...we say it has to be Four Square. We say: *This is how you play it. Now it's your turn. No, I think that was out. No, Cindy, it was out.*

You're making up the game and the rules. You're deciding all the conflicts and all the things that we want our children to grow up developing that confidence and communication skills and the compromise that comes from "Okay, I thought it was out. You thought it was in. Let's just do it over." Are you going to stop and not get to play the rest of the day or are you going to say okay and sort of get socialized? We are like sucking them out of their childhoods as if we don't think they do it right. *Oh, that's not exactly right. That's not exactly fair. That wasn't exactly in. That's not exactly how you hold the ball.*

So we're like outsourcing their childhood to us. We're going to do it better than them. Let's just do it for them and that way they're safe and they're learning the right things. In the meantime, all those things that you're supposed to get in childhood and that you normally get through play and through free time, you're not getting. Either you're substituting the parent basically taking the role of the kids or it's a scream...taking the kids' imagination. Either way, something is laying fallow that is supposed to grow up at that time.

Somebody wrote me a letter today saying, *What if we literally put them in a box until their head hits the ceiling and they couldn't grow anymore?*

That's sort of what we're doing. We want our kids to grow but we're keeping them locked inside the box that we call safety that is actually stunting.

*Lain:* So we stunt them. They never really learn some of those skills whether they be hard skills like making dinner because that ammonia might burn their little hands.

*Lenore:* There's social skills and then when I think back on childhood I didn't have a particularly exciting or interesting childhood. It was just sort of a normal suburban childhood but I do have very happy memories of spending time outside, walking around and looking at nature. I don't even think of myself as a particularly natured chick at all, but there are memories of like when I would go to the Library by myself. That was kind of exhilarating or when I would go to the pool in our town and I would jump from the high dive. I don't even think there's a high dive left anymore. It's like if your memory is from the inside of a minivan trying to eat your snack in-between the tutor and the soccer game, I feel like we've deprived them of something formative.

*Lain:* So it's not just the over protection as much as just that freedom or a combination of both.

*Lenore:* Like I said, I'm all for protection. I'm all for safety. When my son, the same famous subway rider, turned 10 we had a birthday party for him that was a football theme party. The goodie bag gift I gave to him was protective mouth guards. No candy. No little game. No gift card. It was a protective mouth guard because I love kids being safe, but when we exaggerate the dangers out there and then react as if they're happening...if they went outside there is probably a murderer waiting there....we are keeping them inside and not even allowing them to develop the street smarts that would keep them safe.

I talked to the head of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children- the group that puts the pictures on the milk cartons that say: Have you seen me? They run all the ads like on the WalMart posters and the newspapers...like a little tiny strip at the top of an advertisement that says: Have you seen me? I was abducted whenever...Those people's first concern is keeping *people* safe from abduction. When I spoke to their head he said: *Stranger/Danger is a myth we are trying to get rid of. We applaud what you're doing...that's A. B...he said we're not saying you have to keep your kids under lock and key to keep them safe because what they found when they interviewed kids who had successfully eluded kidnappers, the common theme was that the safest ones were the ones with the self confidence to stand up to somebody and run away or scream or run across the street. You're being followed by a van so you run across the street and pound on the door of a stranger and say: Let me in. The stranger across the street was not stalking you. It's the van that's stalking you. The ability to assess the situation and to ask for help even from a stranger and to assert yourself and trust your instincts, those are self*

confidence. That's the self confidence that comes from being out...not having your parents figure everything out for you. It's called street smarts. We stunt that at our children's peril.

*Lain:* Ours as well if we don't want our kids living with us when they're 45.

*Lenore:* That, too.

*Lain:* So how do we bring ourselves back to reality? We've been fed this constant diet of fear and danger and I know it's probably going to be small steps, but do you have some suggestions?

*Lenore:* I do. I have a bunch in the book. There are Free-Range Baby Steps and Free-Range Brave Steps and then Giant Leaps for Free-Range Kind. A baby step is something like leave your cell phone home for a day. I say that because it's very easy to get in the habit of picking up your phone all the time when your kids call when they have a very minor question and then figuring out the answer for them.

I say this because it happened to me. My oldest son was 10. He called me right after I'd left the house because I was going to some morning meeting one time. I had my cell with me and I answered it because I was just out the door barely. He said, "Mom!" I said, 'What?' He said: Can I have another piece of banana bread? I was so sad...more like appalled...for both of us. ...that he thought he had to ask and I was appalled that I had raised a kid that he thought he had to ask because if he was hungry

enough for a piece of banana bread, common sense should tell him that he could and should eat it or even if I would say no that he should eat it. If you're hungry and I made banana bread and it's sitting there...he wasn't asking: Mom, there's a couple of beers in the fridge. Is it okay? So when you have the phone with you, it's our job when we have toddlers to say: Don't touch that. No cookie now. We're about to have dinner...or any of those things that sort of...you're right on top of them teaching them how the world works.

At some point they have to figure these things out on their own. If we're always answering those questions like I said, even to the point where my son was 10, then 10 becomes the new 2. If you leave your cell phone home for the day you can warn them in advance. They have to decide should they do their homework first or have a snack ...or can they stop at the park on the way home...little things that we used to decide and that I really....You don't become an adult by just becoming 18. You become an adult by a series of experiences and decisions. Let them make a couple of their decisions and they're on their way. Some of their decisions will be stupid. Can I eat the entire loaf of banana bread? If they decide that and have this horrible stomachache, well, there's a lesson learned, too.

*Lain:* Right. It's some of those decisions that you want your child to make in a more safe environment before they turn 18 and go off to college.

*Lenore:* Right. Can I smoke this whole bag of hash, *Mom? Well, I just left home and you had some hash already. That's your limit for today, dear.*

*Lain:* Helping train them with the training wheels on where the parents can be the training wheels or the rails so they have some experience making those types of decisions before...

*Lenore:* Then you take the training wheels off. That's the other thing. It's like we're never taking the training wheels off. I do hear about parents who go to college with their kids and do the registering for them and help figure out what their classes...not that you wouldn't want to help them a little. Honey, if you want to be an accountant, you should probably take math. That's not a bad idea. But to argue with the professor: You gave her a B+ but I thought that was A- work.

I've heard from a lot of professors who are annoyed that their students' parents literally contact them and argue with them. You do have to take the training wheels off. One other thing that I think would help us all to sort of turn back the clock and give our kids the similar childhood to the one a lot of us had at least to being outside and playing and being in a swarm of kids who can organize their own kickball games is getting a critical mass of children back outside. It's really hard to send your kid outside (I know this because I can't do it.) when there's nobody else on the street that they see outside that they could go over and start playing basketball with or jump rope with.

Even though it sounds a little crazy and gimmicky, I have proposed May 22 as Take Our Children to the Park and Leave Them There Day. People

keep saying: *That sounds like a gimmick.* I'm like: *It is a gimmick. That's why it sounds like a gimmick.* If we got people doing it...if you and I didn't necessarily know each other already but on May 22 we're bringing out kids to the park (I'm not talking about 3 year olds. I'm talking about 7,8,9,10 year olds...bringing them to the playground or 11 year olds-sending them to the playground...) for even a half hour just so they get used to saying: *Hey, whatcha doing? Or I'll push you on the swing. Or I'll race you to the top of the slide.* (I know that's supposed to be so dangerous!)...just so they remember how to do things without Mommy saying: Here's a shovel. Why don't we make a sandcastle together? ...making it with other kids.

Once they get used to that then maybe they'll come out again and then other kids will join them because they pass by the park and there's kids playing there. It has to start somewhere. I doubt it's going to be an entire revolution on May 22 and May 23. We won't be able to get the kids in until the street lights come on. I don't have that big a hope, but just to wrap our minds around the idea.

*Lain:* You know, I'm surprised you didn't do Take Your Child to the Subway and Leave Them There Day.

*Lenore:* Well, that's a Manhattan visit. Yeah. Send Your Child on the Subway to the Park and Leave Them There Day.

*Lain:* I think that's a fantastic idea. You're totally right that it has to start somewhere and it'll start small. It's interesting to think about the fact that smaller children will interact with each other without that proper introduction or they don't even care if they know the other child or not. Then they lose that partly because we don't encourage them to go and see who is outside because there isn't usually anyone outside.

*Lenore:* One of the things that turns out to lie at the heart of free-range kids is the idea of recreating community. It involves a couple of things. One is getting children back outside. Two is the other day (I write for Parent Dish, as well. It's aol's parenting site.) I wrote about this mom who told me that she'd been at the Library with her daughter in the children's room. Her daughter is 5. It was just her, her kid, and the Librarian in the room. They had to leave really soon to pick up their other kid so the mom said: *Listen. I have to go and check out my book in the adult room upstairs. It's going to be about 3 minutes. Do you want to stay here and read or do you want to come up here with me?* The kid said they wanted to stay there so the mom (I thought responsibly) told the Librarian: *Look, I'm going to be gone for a couple of minutes. I'm checking out my book. I'll be right back.*

The Librarian looked at her and said, "That's fine but you should know that the Library is not free from the same dangers that are out there in the real world." It was sort of a warning like anything could happen. So the mother decided that it was a chance she was willing to take since it was just 'you and her' in here. She ran up and got the book and came back down. But when she told her friends about this, everybody was very judgmental like:

*You left your kid alone in the Library?* Then after 1,400 comments on Parent Dish later I realized this is a hot button issue because a lot of the people said: *I would never do that.* But a lot of the people also said: Who said it's the Librarian's job to babysit your child? There's something awful about that interpretation of this story because she wasn't asking the Librarian to babysit. In fact, she was just alerting the Librarian to the fact that the kid was there and she was self sufficient and already engaged in her book. It was a 3 minute run to another part of the Library...not I'm going to Kansas and I'll be back in a few days. There's this feeling of put-upon-ness when we are asked to do something that I think should be a normal give and take of community. *Oh, you're leaving your kid here a few minutes? I'll look at her. I'll watch her.* I don't expect to have to change her diaper. I'm not going to have to feed her a snack. I'm just looking after her or being in the same room with her as a fellow human being for a few minutes.

That is considered an awful obligation. It comes from this icky idea that we're all in this for ourselves and you can't trust anyone. *If something bad happens I don't want to be sued.* There's the litigiousness of our society that sort of colors our view of like 'I don't want that kid coming over. What if he trips? I don't want anybody...' Like those people who make those parents sign waivers when they drop their children off for an overnight, a sleep over. It's like: *Look, I don't want you to sue me if she jumps off the bed and breaks her arm.* It's becoming the opposite of community. It's regarding everybody as a threat and an obligation instead of all being in this together.

What I'm trying to do with the Take Our Kids to the Park and Leave Them There Day and with the Free-Range Kids movement is come up with ways that we can start depending and trusting each other and leaning on each other and not thinking that that's the most naïve and stupid thing in the world to do. We used to do it and it worked pretty well.

*Lain:* Right. It did. Internally if we're one of the moms who wants to move in this direction of more community, is there anything that you can suggest so we can encourage other people in that ...?

*Lenore:* In the book I have a couple of suggestions. One of them is a fun and easy one, I think. Say you're waiting for soccer to begin and the soccer coach isn't there but there are 5 Moms and 5 kids or say 4 Moms, a Dad, and 5 kids or whatever or you're waiting for the gate at school to open or you're waiting at the bus stop and there's like one child per each parent as if they're like bodyguards. I say make this nice gesture and say: *Listen, I know you guys have to get to work or probably have other stuff you need to do, I'll watch them if you want to go. Don't feel bad. I'll watch your kids for you.* It's like waking people up. Boing! You mean you're willing to watch my kids for this whole of 7 minutes it will take until soccer starts? I can trust you? I guess I could. You're here with your kid. The chances of you killing my kid while your kid watches are pretty slim. You're probably not going to abduct all 7 of them. That would be a lot of Happy Meals.

Reassert the idea that we can help each other and be a part of a community by doing something as simple as that. If everybody says, *No, I'm going to stay here. She needs me. What if she falls or whatever?* Then you can flip it and say: *Listen. I have a report due. I'm going to leave Cindy with you guys.* You've already offered to watch them so it's not like you're always a foisterer and never the foistee. Do that and like remind them that you trust them and you trust your kid to stand here and not run out in the street because she's already 6 or whatever. Just remind people that that can be a normal way of life.

Another thing I suggest in the book and in my real life is TV is so scary and graphic, and I spoke to a TV historian who said that Law and Order always has a kid being raped or kidnapped or some gruesome murder. He said that they are so graphic that there was not a single episode of Law and Order that could have been legally shown on television before 1981. Until then it would've been considered almost pornographic or just like a smut film. You don't show children being bound and gagged. That was just not done but now we do and it's considered nightly entertainment. If you're going to spend an hour watching that and getting chilled to the bone and getting those images seared on your memory whether you want them there or not, take that hour and go into the real world which is like the one that happens outside your door, and take your kid with you if you want and walk around and reacquaint yourself with the reason you moved there.

If you're lucky enough to be middle class or wealthier than that, chances are you chose your neighborhood for a reason. The reason was you liked

it and wanted to raise your kids there. So why are you raising your kids in the house? Familiarize yourself with the neighborhood and the neighbors. That's something that will make you and your children safer. There's somebody that you can run to...somebody watching out for your kid. One guy wrote to my website who said he lives in a neighborhood in Brooklyn where they're always filming Law and Order and it's a quiet, nice, safe neighborhood but of course on Law and Order it looks like it's riddled with dead bodies. That's the difference. He lives in his neighborhood and Law and Order puts the bodies there.

*Lain:* It's like this vicious circle. Some movement has to be made to breakout. That's what I loved about your book in particular...the small steps that you gave. It wasn't like: Okay, now we're all sending our kids off to...

*Lenore:* Sign them up for that space shuttle.

*Lain:* Exactly. Wherever we were on that continuum of paranoia, there were specific suggestions that we could take.

*Lenore:* It's not like you're get all the way over the paranoia. I'm not. If my son is late...bad scenarios kick in but I also try to temper it with: He's out there. I've taught him how to cross the street safely. I've taught him what to do if he's followed by a stranger. Now he has a cell phone. When I did my original subway ride with him he didn't have a phone. Everybody yelled at me. I said: Well, that makes sense. Let's get him a cell phone. I don't want to be doctrinaire. If something makes sense, you try it.

The other thing I once had people write into me about was: What's the time that you thought your kid was lost and you panicked? There were tons and tons of people who wrote in. Yeah, I was at the grocery. I was at the Fair. I turned around to buy the tickets and he wasn't there. The kids always end up fine. We all go through that panic. What news would like you to do is when the panic happens imagine the very worst and put yourself in a situation where you will never ever lose sight of your kid again and the only situation like that is maximum security home, I guess....kid locked inside.

*Lain:* Ankle bracelet...

*Lenore:* Don't believe they're not trying to sell you that. There are all sorts of ads for GPS devices to put in kids' backpacks.

*Lain:* Have you ever had anyone write to you and say: *Gosh, Lenore. I took your advice and my kid got hit by a bus and ....*

*Lenore:* Not yet. I have a lot of wood here. I'm knocking on wood. Like I said, if the world were perfectly safe I would have an easier argument to make. The world is not perfectly safe. There are cars and crime. The crime happens to be at the lowest level in 30 years and that's all I can say. There is a tradeoff between...our job is to minimize risks. That's why our kids wear helmets when they ride their bikes. That's why I have them in car seats. Minimized risk is a great idea, but to try to eliminate it is an impossible goal and one that ends up like: Well, you can't possibly eat a hot dog because the hot dog could choke him and he can't possibly take a bath

because he could drown. He can't possibly ride his bike because he could get knocked off. Finally, there's nothing left to do. I've gotten letters from people like that. A fifteen year old was spending his whole Christmas vacation inside eating and playing video games. That's what he told me. He's not allowed to go outside and there's nothing else left to do. He said: Even though I like eating and video games, I'm bored.

*Lain:* Yeah, watching video games, eating, and watching CSI is further part of the vicious circle.

*Lenore:* Yeah, TV would like you to watch more TV. One way it keeps you gripped to it is to show you the worst possible things and then show them to you again as if you're helping by watching. It's like: New details in the such and such disappearance case. Can you afford to miss these? It's like: No. I feel bad for that girl so I'll watch. You're not helping but it feels like you're helping. Our hearts are so stunned by these sad things that we want to do whatever we can but sitting there and watching TV and getting more scared doesn't really help anyway.

*Lain:* One of the other things I wanted to ask your thoughts on...Did anybody call your husband 'the worst dad in America'?

*Lenore:* I was thinking about that today. Nobody has even suggested and it really was a joint decision. We let him go on the subway. Yeah, we should. He's ready for it. A mom in Wyoming whose 12 year old daughter and her friend wanted to go to the mall said: Okay, but you're supposed to be

babysitting today. You're going to take the younger siblings with you. So the two 12 year olds took their 8,7, and 3 year old siblings with them. They spent the morning wandering around the mall and they all had lunch and then it was the afternoon and the 3 year old was in the stroller and the 7 and 8 year olds were watching her and the 12 year olds went into the dressing room to try on a shirt. They left the 8,7, and 3 year olds outside of the dressing room. The mall police were called and the kids emerged with their shirts on and they hauled all 5 of them into the mall security office.

They called the police and the police called the mother of the first 12 year old and they arrested her for negligence. In the end she had to go through a mock trial, realized she would lose, pleaded guilty and had to do six months of parent training...even though she had discussed with the other mom and with her husband. For some reason, anybody who gives the green light for any kind of child independence has a mark on their back, if it's the woman.

*Lain:* I think most of the day to day decisions of parenting do fall to the primary care giver who is the mom.

*Lenore:* Moms are in charge of protection a lot of times. They protect them in the womb. When they come out we're the ones cradling and feeding them most of the time. It is our role to nurture them but nurturing includes independence. Somehow with the heightened sense of danger, it starts seeming very unnatural that a woman who should be protecting her child is putting the child in harm's way even though some of us think we would never try to put our child in harm's way. We calculate it and figure what's

best for our child. Sometimes it's something that looks dangerous to you but doesn't look dangerous to us.

*Lain:* Do you have suggestions or comments from people...say you dropped your child off at the park and the mom or dad who is there when you come to pick up the child says: *Your child was here all by themselves.*

*Lenore:* I have a couple of comments. One is: *Gee, do you ever drive your child in a car?* After they say yes, you say: *Well, aren't you worried about that? Wouldn't you feel terrible if something happened?* They go: *What do you mean?* I go: You know that 40 times more children...that's 40 children for every 1 child that's kidnapped and killed by a stranger, 40 children are killed in a car. There are 2,000 children killed that way every year...as passengers in cars. Actually, the most common cause of death to children is as passengers in cars. If you decide never to put your child in a car knowing how dangerous that is, then we can talk about whether I put my child in danger of playing in a park. That's one.

Another is: *Did you play in the park as a kid? Without your parents? Yes, you did? Do you realize the crime rate is lower today. Were your parents extremely negligent? Were you in constant danger?* Then you can just talk about whether or not they've read any of the studies that talk about how important play is for children...not that you can really get into a conversation with the person...but play is this really incredibly critical developmental stage of life that you see in all mammals and children

around the world except today when we play for them or take them away from the parks so they won't play because that's unsafe and put them in front of the screen where they will be safe. It's like: Don't you want your children to be safe and healthy and developed? You have to let them play and play by themselves.

*Lain:* Then of course hand them a copy of your book.

*Lenore:* Yeah, at the back of my book I actually have these little clip and save membership cards. Free-Range membership cards. There's one for kids that says: I'm not lost. I'm a Free-Range Kid. I've been taught to cross the street safely. I know never to go off with strangers but I can talk to them. I like being outside and exploring the world. If you're a grown-up you probably did the same thing when you were a kid so please don't feel alarmed. The adults in my life know where I am but if you want to talk to them, please give them a call. Then you fill in the number. Then there's the one for parents that give a bunch of nice statistics like there's been a 36% decline in homicides in children since '93 and 60% decline in homicides of older children, 79% decline in sex victimization....You have some statistics to carry with you.

*Lain:* That is great. Lenore, this has just been fabulous.

*Lenore:* Oh, thank you. It was fun for me.

*Lain:* Good. I think we've given some specific strategies for people and some things for them to think about. Why don't you just summarize here at the

end where people can find you and the name of your book again? Let's let them know where to track you down.

*Lenore:* Okay. I'd love to. The book is called Free-Range Kids. It's available now in paperback. If you get it on Amazon it's like \$10.17 although it's \$14.95 if you buy it in your local bookstore. My blog is Freerangekids.com. May 22<sup>nd</sup> is Take Our Children to the Park and Leave Them There Day. If you're going to participate, let me know. I can tell all the predators on my mailing list where your children will be. No, I tell other moms that 'Look, in Kansas at such and such a park so and so is going to be there. Let's go and meet each other. Part of the deal is to just get like-minded people together to start giving our kids their childhood back.

*Lain:* Right. I love it. It's great. Lenore, thank you so much for being with us. This is fabulous and I will see you on the blog and everyone else please tune in the rest of the week for the rest of the calls. I think it's a wrap. Thanks to our listeners. I'll catch you on our next call. Bye everybody.