

THE BRANDING OF DANGER

by PIPPA BIDDLE

THE DISPATCH BY FOLK REBELLION

A mother and daughter are in an office with a woman in a white lab coat. She's making a pitch: "...the sense of security, the peace of mind. I mean, the stories we've been hearing, they are truly inspirational." Just a few seconds later, the child has a chip implanted into her brain. As she watches cartoons, the woman in the lab coat walks the mother through the features. She can track location, monitor vitals, and even "relay her optic feed" — she can see through her daughter's eyes. Should her daughter see or hear something that is potentially stressful or upsetting, like violence, she can censor it out even if she isn't there to cover her eyes and ears herself.

This, of course, is fiction. It's the second episode of Black Mirror's fourth season, titled "Arkangel." And the technology the episode is built around, an advanced parental monitoring device, is addictive. It's simply too easy. Each action feels like protection, but it's smothering and isolating in aggregate.

What's most terrifying, though, is that it's not that far from the reality of parenting today. We may not be able to see through our children's eyes or censor the world around them, but we can track them through smartphones and fitness trackers, limit their freedom of movement by keeping them indoors and within arms reach, all to reduce their exposure to anything even remotely risky. Parenting hasn't always looked like this.

There have always been overprotective parents, but the helicopter parenting trend of the last few decades illustrates a massive shift towards a "Caution! Danger!" point of view.

Some say it started with a boy named Etan Patz. Patz was abducted in 1979 when he was only six years old, but he became a household name in 1984 when he was the first missing child to appear on the side of a milk carton. Part of a campaign run by the National Child Safety Council in partnership with dairies nationwide, the program would ultimately inspire others to follow suit. Grocery bags, toll tickets, and pizza boxes are just a few of the normally nondescript objects that were plastered

with faces, names, ages, and eye colors.

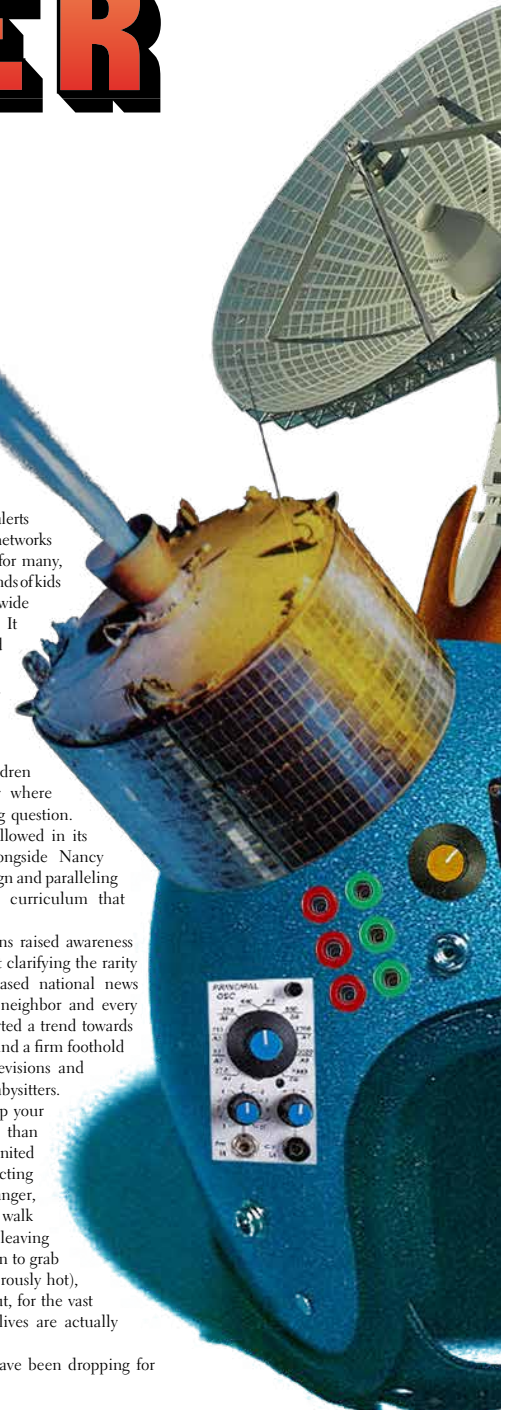
This was before AMBER alerts and before national news networks gained bigtime viewership so, for many, the idea that hundreds of thousands of kids were reported missing nationwide was a shocking realization. It increased vigilance, and it bred fear.

Only a few years earlier, the Atlanta Monster — a killing spree between 1979 and 1981 that resulted in the death of at least 28 black children — had made "Do you know where your children are?" a haunting question. The milk carton campaign followed in its footsteps, building steam alongside Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and paralleling D.A.R.E., the anti-drug K-12 curriculum that launched in 1983.

These and other campaigns raised awareness about risks to children without clarifying the rarity of such risks, and the increased national news coverage made every town a neighbor and every crime feel next door. This started a trend towards parental protectionism that found a firm foothold in the technological era. Televisions and gaming consoles make great babysitters.

It's easier than ever to keep your kid "safe," but it is also safer than ever to raise a kid in the United States. If parents were reacting to real and imminent danger, not letting your 10-year-old walk themselves to school or not leaving your kid in the car as you run in to grab milk (presuming it's not dangerously hot), would be logical responses. But, for the vast majority of Americans, their lives are actually very safe.

Nationwide, crime stats have been dropping for



decades, and many areas, including large cities, are safer than ever. "Stranger danger" feels like a shadow that follows parents of young children around, waiting to snatch their kid the moment they look away, but abduction by someone outside of the victim's family is incredibly uncommon. The reason child abduction stats have risen isn't strangers grabbing kids out of grocery stores, it's family members — often parents — saying "to hell with it" with custody agreements.

And yet, it's the unknown that most terrifies us. "What bleeds leads" because drama and danger keeps eyes on screens, and eyes on screens bring in more money from advertisers. The impact is startling. Some people stockpile emergency food rations hawked by conspiracy theorists like Infowars host Alex Jones, who warns that "there's a war on for your life." Others stockpile weapons in the name of self-defense that, according to the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, are rarely used for that purpose. For most though, the impacts of using danger as a media tool are less overtly shocking, but still culturally damaging. In 1969, nearly 50% of kids in the US walked or biked to school. According to NPR, only 13% walked or biked to school in 2012.

Some parents are pushing back against the obsessive overprotection that has resulted from the branding of danger, and they're making headlines in the process. Lenore Skenazy was called the "world's worst mom"

Skenazy argues that by acting as if "our children are in mortal peril," we are robbing them of the opportunity to "dose themselves with risk," a vaccine that builds up resilience. She's not advocating for dropping kids into the deep end to learn how to swim, but in slowly expanding a child's perimeter over time as they gain skills, knowledge of their surroundings, and self-awareness. This measured method, she says, is the difference between letting kids make mistakes and endangering them.

Skenazy has been criticized for potentially going too far towards parents' rights. By advocating that parents should have ultimate say over what their children can do and where they can go, some argue that free-range parenting could allow true child endangerment to fly under the radar. But all parenting strategies come with risks, even the hypervigilant ones. Recent research has shown that exposure to high levels of screen-centric technology, the babysitter of the 21st century, can harm children's development, and what used to take a village has turned into nanny-911. From branding the world as dangerous to parental policing, everyone is acting in what they think is the best interest of their children. Unfortunately, the damage takes a while to manifest.

"We're not doing them any favors," Skenazy says, "by being a concierge to their childhood." A kid, or anyone for that matter, may seem safe sitting in front of a TV screen or being monitored on an Apple watch — or even with a brain implant à la "Arkangel" — but the long-term impacts of succumbing to the branding of danger could be far scarier than the false sense of safety is worth.

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after she wrote a column about letting her then 9-year-old ride the New York City subway alone. Today, she is the President & Co-Founder of Let Grow, a non-profit that "believes in overthrowing the culture of overprotection," and a prominent face in the free-range parenting movement. According to Skenazy, her son was not just capable of riding the subway alone; they had trained for it. Hovering over children is just an excuse, she says, to avoid teaching "the hard stuff."

In a phone interview, Skenazy shared that "Parents have always protected their children," but "what's new is the level of surveillance and assistance this generation is assumed to need." This is further exacerbated by the existence of technology that enables it. We may not be tracking them through brain implants (yet), but we do have GPS-enabled smartphones and the ever-vigilant parenting police: parents, or just anyone who, instead of asking a kid if they're ok, is quick to report solo walks or parentless playtime to the police.

THE DISPATCH BY FOLK REBELLION

PARENTING MANTRAS

Bridget Crocker:

"To raise capable kids, you have to let them be capable. Teach them how, and trust them to navigate challenges rather than try to protect them from experiencing suffering or unpleasantness."

Emily F. Popek:

"Guide, don't steer."

Tracy Ross:

"Give a little, get a little."

Pete DeSarno:

"To raise a good person. That's all I can say. That's the goal: to raise a good person."