

Statement of Peter Gray
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in support of Ohio S.B. 277

I'm a research professor of developmental psychology at Boston College who has published books and many academic articles on the value of children's independent play and exploration for their psychological as well as physical development. I'm also first author of an introductory psychology textbook used in universities throughout the world.

Over the past several decades we have, as a society, increasingly deprived children of freedom to play, roam, and in other ways act independently of direct adult supervision and control. Over the same decades we have seen huge increases in rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicide among children, teens, and young adults. My research and that of others convinces me that there is a cause-effect relationship between these trends. Children *need* independent activity to develop the mental qualities that allow them to cope successfully with the inevitable stressors of life.

One way to think of this cause-effect relationship involves the concept that psychologists call *internal locus of control*, which is the internal sense of being able to solve one's own problems, deal with the bumps in the road of life, and, more generally, take charge of one's own life. Research reveals that people of any age with a weak internal locus of control are far more likely to fall apart in response to life's inevitable stressors than are those with a stronger internal locus. Research also reveals, no surprise, that as social constraints on children's independent activity have increased over decades, young people's internal locus of control has become ever weaker.

So, we have here a cause-effect chain: Reduction in independent activity → a weaker internal locus of control → increased susceptibility to anxiety and depression.

This is just one way to understand the harmful effects of our strong societal constraints on children's freedom. We have reached the point where even eleven- or twelve-year-olds are not allowed the freedoms that were once available to children as young as five or six, such as freedom to walk or bike to school, or play in the neighborhood without the immediate presence of an adult. I have heard from many parents who would love to give their children more outdoor freedom, which they know would be good for them, but do not do so because of fear that they might be charged with child neglect.

There is no magic age at which a child suddenly becomes responsible, capable of self-management. Responsibility grows, like a muscle, with exercise. As children grow older, from about age 4 on, they need ever increasing levels of independent activity. The best judges of what is safe or not for any given child are the child's parents, who know that child and the neighborhood in which the child might play or explore. We need, once again, to start trusting parents to make that judgment.

I am the lead author—along with two other prominent child development researchers--of an article published recently in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, titled *Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Wellbeing*. The article summarizes multiple lines of research evidence that our banning of children from independent activity is a major cause of the record levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide we are seeing today in young people. It also offers some routes for addressing this problem, the most central of which is to empower parents to use their direct understanding of their children to decide what the child can or cannot do safely. You can access a pdf of the article [here](#).

I support S.B. 277 because, although it will not correct all the effects of the shifts away from independence that have occurred in recent decades,

it will help by empowering parents to make reasonable decisions regarding their own children's freedom. Utah passed a similar bill several years ago, and I received emails from parents there, afterwards, about the liberating effect it had for them and their children. You can see quotes from a few of those emails in an article I published about the new law on my Psychology Today blog [here](#).

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