

We have a responsibility to look out for all children - not just our own

A desire to protect our offspring from harm has turned into an even greater threat to society as a whole

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A father I know dreads picking up his two-year-old daughter from nursery. He loves watching her run towards him, arms outstretched. The problem is her friends, who come tumbling along with her. "It's Rosie's dad!" They too have arms outstretched, faces lit up. And every time he thinks: how do I get out of this? He cannot hug them, he cannot let them kiss him, he cannot let them clamber on his knee. "Hello!" he says, standing up quickly, smiling anxiously, repelling them - and watching their puzzled disappointment.

Another father regularly takes his three-year-old to the playground in the park. That too is full of hazards. On the climbing frame a child next to his will suddenly complain of being stuck, and will he help them down? At the swings they run up and ask, will you lift me up, will you push me too? He says the answer always has to be no, even if a child looks as if they are about to fall. How can he risk being seen with his hands around another person's child?

It isn't just men who feel this is becoming an absolute taboo. A mother of three small girls says that she too avoids all contact with the children of strangers. "If a child falls off their bike in the park, and is screaming because they've grazed their knee, all the adults nearby freeze. You want to comfort them, but you can't react. We're all waiting for the one responsible adult to respond. I don't want to get punched in the face because I touched someone else's child - and where I live, that's quite likely."

Almost imperceptibly, and without any discussion about its desirability, we have arrived at a situation where adults feel they are not allowed to interact with children, unless they are professionals, relations or friends. Evolution designed small children to be appealing, yet we are made to feel awkward for responding to them. What began as an understandable desire to protect children from the risks of sexual abuse seems to have mutated into something far broader and more disturbing: the assumption that any adult can legitimately be considered a threat to any child. What is so perverse about this is that there is so little evidence that it is true. The number of children abducted and killed by strangers averages around seven a year, while the vast majority of all sexual abuse is committed by relatives or friends.

If young children are blissfully unaware of the way they must regard adults, we rapidly formalise the awareness of threat by teaching them about stranger danger in schools. My daughter came home at seven or eight full of the self-important gravity of having something really serious to tell. The policeman had shown them a film. Jane had talked to a strange man. Jane had been kidnapped. Lucky Jane had been rescued, but children must understand the lesson - never talk to strangers. I was incandescent. This was, and is, a pernicious doctrine. I didn't want her to spend her life distrustful of anyone outside a small social group.

It was not the culture I grew up in. As children in the 60s, we knew about funny men, but we were told they were rare. Adults in general, and women in particular, were people to be turned to and trusted. They were also there to stop us doing things we shouldn't, whether that was running out across a road, or hitting another child. As children in London we were frequently out by ourselves,

but we felt that the adult world was constantly checking on us. Any passing grownup could say hello, or tell us how to behave, and frequently did. It seemed that adults in general had shared beliefs about what we could and couldn't do, and they tended to back one another up.

In the past three decades, anxieties about abuse have merged with a growing individualism in our patterns of child-rearing, so that none of those assumptions now hold. Children have become the private concern of their parents. If adults are scared of being warm to others' offspring, they are even more wary of reprimanding them, because any consensus about behaviour, or about the legitimacy of adult authority, has vanished.

This has left a disastrous gulf in our society. Most adults now deal with unknown children by blanking them out - wishing not to be seen as a threat when children are young; and fearing that the children themselves may pose a threat as they grow up. It is a strange, disconnected experience that we are providing for the young in our society.

I asked five children - all of whom have travelled extensively on public transport since they were 11 - whether adults ever spoke to them. Never, they said. Whether they were being turned off a bus and left to walk two miles home because they had lost the money for their fare, whether they were being mugged, or whether they and their friends were being appallingly rowdy in the back seats, no one ever intervened. For much of the time that our children are in a public space, they are experiencing neither the support nor the sanctions of a wider society. They are being left to themselves.

Such enforced neglect must have a negative effect on children's attitudes. If the adults you encounter every day do not return your smiles, do not dust your knees when you fall over, or do not help you when you are lost, and if you later discover that all of them are to be regarded as potential threats, then why should you grow up to care about their feelings when you chuck rubbish into their front garden or vomit into their hedge? What connections have you learned to make with the strangers who surround you? It is not surprising that a recent study on levels of trust among teenagers found that British children scored lower than almost any other country in Europe.

This is a historically unprecedented way for children to be brought up - leaving the job exclusively to parents and paid professionals. It is a toxic combination, for just as adults have been forced to retreat from a generalised responsibility for socialising the young, so many of the families that retain it have either been disintegrating, or finding themselves so preoccupied with work and their own needs that there is little time left to respond to their children. The evidence of inadequate socialisation is everywhere, from Ofsted's concerns about increasing numbers of four-year-olds arriving at school unable to talk, to the anxiety about teenagers behaving badly

All this matters because the lessons we learn when very young influence us powerfully later on. Twenty years ago I watched a haunting documentary, in which a Jewish Dutch psychologist returned to the town he was living in as a small child when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands. He wanted to know why, in his apparently homogeneous street, some people had risked everything to shelter Jews, while others had casually betrayed anyone who offended them. The answer lay in their childhoods. Those who were brought up to perceive anyone beyond a small group as "the other" were the betrayers. Those brought up to think "There but for the grace of God go I" were the ones willing to make a sacrifice. If we want a society where we trust one another, we need to build it, not undermine its foundations.