

in a column for *The New York Sun*. She was accused by readers of child abuse and pounced on by talk shows as she defended the decision not to bubble-wrap her children, given the streets of her home city are safer now than in decades. She has since written the book *Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe Self-Reliant Children Without Going Nuts with Worry*.

"Our TV shows like *Law & Order*, they continually reinforce the idea that there are dead bodies everywhere, that there's always a rape, a murder, a ritual disembowelment around the corner," Skenazy tells *Inquirer*. "Regardless of the reality that life is pretty safe, this perception is being drilled into us that something horrible is happening outside the door."

Parents expect children to be helpless

But surely her heart was in her mouth when her son took that subway trip?

"If I had thought it was that dicey or dangerous, I wouldn't have done it," she says. "I'm a nervous mum. My two sons always had the right size safety seat in the back of the car. I make them wear helmets when they ride their bikes.

"My husband and I discussed it. We let him do it because he'd been asking us to take him somewhere and let him find his own way home. He felt he was ready. He's been on the subways a million times. They're safe, crowded, busy, nothing happens on them. It wasn't a dangerous part of town. It was from Bloomingdale's, for goodness' sake."

It was then the notion of free-range kids developed, first a blog, then a book and now perhaps, as Skenazy says, a movement. She is in Sydney for the Festival of Dangerous Ideas this weekend before heading to Melbourne next week to speak at the Wheeler Centre: Books, Writing and Ideas.

She wants parents to think

... a child to see if they want to play," she says.

Skenazy says parents have fallen into the trap of expecting children to be able to do nothing on their own, and in a way that robs them of a true childhood and the chance for strong childhood memories. The fact that there's a product or course for every conceivable developmental goal for children only digs us deeper into that trap.

Earlier this year, Skenazy promoted *Take Our Children to the Park and Leave Them There Day* in a bid to encourage children to play by themselves without being told what to do. Parents were advised to go for a walk for a while, to leave their kids unsupervised. She was howled down for creating a pedophile's picnic.

While she worried that just one incident would be enough to sheet the blame to her, she wonders why no one is blaming parents for letting their children sit in their rooms and play video games, creating obesity and diabetes.

Skenazy knows hovering parents are often acting out fear of not keeping up. "Their anxiety is totally understandable. We're all told that there'll only be three jobs left when they graduate and they'll either be working out in Bangalore or serving fries. And all the products prey on that anxiety, tell you that if you don't do jamboree, the kid down the road will be ahead of your child at school."

For all that, she doesn't have a guaranteed formula for rearing self-reliant children. "The idea that there's a perfect way, that if we hit on the exact number of extra classes versus freely frolicking versus just daydreaming that we will have the perfect child, is ridiculous," she says.

"Here I am speaking for a movement but my own kids do absolutely no creative stuff. I constantly wish they spent less time at the computer.

"The point is you don't have to be perfect. Your kids don't have to be completely free-range. But we don't have to be quite as worried about predators, crime, terrorism, and we don't have to do it all."