

Child endangerment

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

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On a long drive the other day, I heard an NPR story about an [adventure playground](#) in California where kids can “play wild” on a half-acre park that has the deliberate vibe (and potential danger) of a junkyard. The day before that, the [TED Radio Hour](#) featured a talk by Gever Tulley, founder of [The Tinkering School](#), who says that when kids are given sharp tools and matches, their imaginations take off and they become better problem-solvers.

These stories are part of a trend in which Americans (or at least American journalists) are beginning to question the [overprotection](#) believed by many to characterize modern American parenting. In Europe, by contrast, risky, junkyard playgrounds have been around since the end of World War II, when their construction was spurred by the conviction that children who might grow up to fight wars shouldn't be shielded from danger; rather, they should meet it, early and often, with confidence and courage.

Recently, when a [mother in Florida](#) was arrested for allowing her seven-year-old son to walk alone to a city park a half mile from their house, talk shows, blogs, and Facebook news feeds lit up with impassioned responses, revealing a deep divide over this issue: either the mother's actions constituted criminal negligence or we are now criminalizing commonsense parenting. (Important class issues that come into play here received only scant attention.)

Such a set of cultural concerns could only come about through a particular confluence of factors. Perhaps the most significant is our increasing fearfulness, individually and collectively. Much of it is unfounded, a good deal of it misdirected, almost all of it cultivated dishonestly and exploited shamelessly by those who stand to gain by it. What we *ought* to fear—that honeybees may soon be extinct, for one thing, and that half of the planet's topsoil has been lost in the last 150 years, for another—is overtaken by any number of false worries: that there is something called “the gay agenda,” that President Obama is secretly a Muslim, and (the one that keeps us up at night regardless of our politics) that we are largely failures as

parents.

There is also the factor of the kind of anthropology of children we operate with. In a market economy, children are regarded alternately, though sometimes simultaneously, as commodities/consumers or burdens/liabilities. We routinely think of children as “instruments” for our own fulfillment, “objects” of our (micro)management skills, “projects” for reform or redirection. Of course, we love our children and, of course, we don’t use this language when speaking of them or to them. But we swim in the sea of global capitalism with its discourse of cost-benefit analysis, investment and return, and profitability. Often at the heart of both child-bearing and child-rearing are questions of affordability and the pressure to compete, the latter of which we seem to pass on to our children as readily as we give them our curly hair or nearsightedness.

Our theology of children often doesn’t fare much better. While the church has rightly insisted that children are gifts from God—not commodities and certainly not burdens—parents, congregations, and clergy often unwittingly regard children as personal possessions. When an infant is baptized, the whole community makes long-haul promises to help nurture the child in the way of discipleship. Yet when that child is not the sweetly sleeping cherub in her mother’s arms but a rebellious teen making disastrous choices, we often turn away—embarrassed for the family, hopeful that the kid will get the professional help she needs. It’s not our business, we tell ourselves. It’s a private matter. We wish them all the best.

What we don’t seem to get very well is that in the mystery of baptism we discover that our lives are linked with *all* those—children, women, and men—who have been baptized into Christ. And because we believe that *all* people—all children, women, and men everywhere—are created in the image of God, our lives are also linked with those of other faiths and those of no faith. No exception.

But what about the children of Gaza—the traumatized and suffering, the dead and dying? What about the refugee children at our southern border? Why is it that we cannot conceive that *they* are our children, too? That our lives are inextricably, quite inconveniently, linked with theirs?

We feel sorry for them—perhaps deeply sorry—but when we make them into objects of our pity, we engage in a kind of emotional self-indulgence that may soothe our own discomfort for awhile (at least until the next human catastrophe appears on our

screen) but which changes nothing.

All the while we worry that our own children won't be tough enough. We debate the parenting skills of a single mother in Florida. These are preoccupations of the safe and the privileged. It's only if our children are secure, after all, that we can contemplate filling their lives with more risk.

In the meantime there are children living daily under conditions of unspeakable danger. Theirs are playgrounds of death, not of their own choosing. They inhabit junkyards of ruined hopes, ruined lives.

Would that we might be accused of overprotecting them.

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