

An Anxious Generation—of Parents

[Carrie McKean](#)

Jesus told us not to worry, but worry is our culture's parenting default. It's harming our kids.



As my daughter dangled 10 feet above the ground, legs wrapped around the thick, smooth trunk of a vine in the middle of the Belizean jungle, I stood below her and considered how far she was from solid ground, a paved road, and the nearest hospital.

Needless to say, this had not been on my agenda for the day. We were visiting a small village on a mission trip to western Belize with friends from our church who've been coming annually to the same town for more than a decade. Our task was to help in the village school, support community development projects, share the love of Jesus, and deepen friendships with people who live in a totally different cultural context from our own.

It was that last part that put my daughter up the tree. We took a morning walk to see some little-known Mayan ruins but detoured to a no-safety-harnesses jungle adventure course led by Crocs-wearing Julio, our local friend who clearly didn't find it worrisome to let a child free climb.

Back home in the States, we're constantly worried about our kids. It's well-documented and generally accepted that [smartphones](#), [social media](#), and a lack of [childhood independence](#) and [free play](#) contribute to creating what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt famously dubbed an "[anxious generation](#)." But in all this collective handwringing, we tend

to overlook a closely related and equally pervasive problem: unchecked, socially normalized parental anxiety and the smothering parenting style it produces.

There's nothing new under the sun, and I'm sure, to some extent, that's true of parental worries. Throughout the ages, parents have feared losing their children to sickness, accidents, or violence. Right now, while I worry about volleyball team tryouts and first day of school jitters, mothers around the world worry about bombs and bullets, famine and frontlines.

The problem of the relatively comfortable, like us, seems to be what we do with our worries. Our parenting strategies successfully soothe our own fears, but that doesn't mean they meet our children's developmental needs. We disempower our kids instead of helping them grow into competent, confident adults. We rebrand hyper-concern as proof of love and treat our pursuit of safety and ease like whipped cream on hot chocolate: If some is good, surely more will be better.

Across political and social divides, for example, parents are among the [fiercest opponents](#) to school smartphone bans, despite the [mountain of evidence](#) telling us they're disrupting education. The rationale? Safety and ease. Smartphones give us the previously unimaginable ability to know where our children are at every single moment. We envision ourselves rescuing them from a school shooting—or, far more realistically, rescuing them from the consequences of a forgotten lunchbox.

And phones aren't all of it. We stack one caution on another: halved grapes and five-point harnesses give way to [AirTag tracking](#) and [compulsive grade checking](#). With all our hovering and fixing and fretting, we accidentally tell our children the world is a dangerous place they're ill-equipped to manage without our ever-present help.

But we're wrong about the pursuit of safety. More *isn't* better. We have a generation of anxious children [in part because](#) we are a [generation of anxious parents](#). However good our intentions, we've harmed a generation because our risk calibrators are broken. We scramble for [protection from rare dangers](#) while paying little heed to the cascade of far [more probable dire consequences](#) our own parenting has created.

In some cases, course correction here may require professional help to get our own anxiety under control. But beyond the clinical realm is a more garden-variety anxiety, the kind of chronic worry that all modern parents have seen, whether in ourselves or in our peers. And in this, most Western Christians look no different from the world.

We are just as anxious as our secular neighbors, and our parenting is just as overcautious. That reality should give us pause considering all Jesus said about the birds of the air and

lilies of the field (Matt. 6:25–34). What we call caution, God may call sin: a clamoring for control and a refusal to trust God with the children he has entrusted to us.

This issue is also different for Christians because we can recognize what other parents cannot: that at its core, the challenge facing us is far more spiritual and existential than practical and procedural.

I know this firsthand. My elder daughter started eighth grade at her public middle school this month. I get the lockdown emails from her campus. Each morning, I watch her walk into the building alongside all those kids carrying invisible burdens and God knows what else in their backpacks, and I have to swallow my fear. I have to dismiss the intrusive thoughts suggesting this may be the last time I'll ever see her.

As my girls get older and their lives spin ever further outside my orbit into a world of disorder and chaos, I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night, heart pounding, feeling as if I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, clutching my daughters' hands so they do not fall. In the rational light of day, I know there's no way to contingency plan my way out of all the ways tragedy or hardship could visit our family. Yet in the deepest part of those nights, it seems I can't stop trying.

Two things can be true at the same time: These sleep-disrupting anxieties are real and profound, *and*, as Christians, we do not have to be consumed by them.

We—I—must start with confession. The illusion of control is a most enchanting elixir, but it will never satisfy. We must admit that we know this is true and that we have pursued control anyway. Perhaps this honesty will make us more ready to turn to Jesus.

“In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). In his final earthly sermon, Jesus made this promise to his disciples. It is also for us. This is not a verse emblazoned on plaques at the local Christian bookstore, but maybe it should be. It is at our peril that we disregard God's promises of weeping and mourning and grief in this world.

To spend so much time and worry trying to avoid trouble is not only unrealistic; it is a rejection of Christ's invitation to trust in the hope he offers no matter our circumstances. It is a rejection of the rest of this very verse: “Take heart!” Jesus commands. “I have overcome the world.”

But what does it look like to trust and take heart? We must pair our confession with real repentance. We must surrender and face each and every day, come what may, with the trust of little ones who know their Father gives good gifts (Luke 11:13).

This is the first parenting lesson in the life of Jesus, given in Mary's prayer upon hearing that she will give birth to the Son of God: “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38,

NRSV). This is a “true prayer of indifference,” [says](#) pastor and author Ruth Haley Barton, in which Mary demonstrates a “profound readiness to set aside her own personal concerns in order to participate in the will of God as it unfolded in human history.”

This kind of holy indifference doesn’t mean uncaring disregard but a willingness to accept God’s will in our lives. The term [dates to the](#) 16th-century theologian Ignatius of Loyola, but the concept has deep scriptural roots. We see it in Hannah’s relinquishing her son Samuel at the temple (1 Sam. 1:28) and in Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39). As Barton advises, sometimes a prayer of indifference must start with a prayer *for* indifference, asking God to help us loosen our grip on whatever we want to hold too tightly.

In Belize, I listened to Julio’s calm voice as he guided my daughter’s descent down the vine. “Let go,” he said, encouraging her to slide down the vine, even though she couldn’t yet see where her feet would land. It was as if I was suddenly startled awake by his words. *Let go. Let go. Let go.*

Julio wasn’t the one exposing my child to inordinate risk and worry. I was—by giving her a life of curated experiences and limited responsibilities, by trading in-real-life adventures for online ones, by making a habit of everyday hovering and motherly helpfulness and near-constant reminders to be careful. *Dear Jesus, help me let go.*

Watching the two of them, I realized the best thing I could do in the moment was get my own nervous energy under control. And when I contrast that moment with life back home, I’m more and more convinced that this is what our children need from us. For when my daughter’s feet were planted firmly on the ground once more, I saw something new flash in her eyes. It was a spark of accomplishment and confidence, I thought, after she’d practiced the trust I’m praying to learn.

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