



## Helicopter or lawnmower? Modern parenting styles can get in the way of raising well-balanced children

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When many middle-aged people think back to their childhood, they remember roaming the streets with their friends during long, hot summers. Our parents threw us out the door in the morning and instructed us not to come back until dinnertime. Often in charge of younger siblings, we strayed further than we should have, got into trouble and, by the end of the summer, had a collection of triumphs, scars and memories for life.

But surely such memories are just nostalgia? The bit about the sun always shining probably is. Yet one thing is certain – the level of parental involvement and supervision in the 1970s was not a tenth of what is expected today. Fast forward to 2014 and a woman was arrested for allowing her nine-year-old to play in the park while she worked.

So what impact do increasing levels of parental involvement have on children? Let's take a look at the evidence.

A recent survey of children aged eight to 12 found that indoor play is now the norm, a third have never splashed in a puddle and the distance children are allowed to play from home has shrunk by 90% since 1970.

Parenting hasn't only changed in terms of what is considered safe for children. Parents now worry more about the impact of their parenting on their children, feeling pressured to provide a stream of stimulating activities in a way that would have once seemed absurd. This has led to the emergence of two types of related parenting styles: the "helicopter" and the "lawnmower".

Helicopter parents, as the name suggests, spend a lot of time hovering. They always stay close to their children, ready to swoop in and direct, help or protect (usually before it is needed). Lawnmower parents are one step ahead of their children, smoothing their path and making sure nothing gets in their way. Common tactics of both include interfering significantly with their grown-up children's lives, such as complaining to employers when their children don't get a job.

But does enabling a childhood free from stress really help them in the long term? And what happens when children never have to get themselves out of tricky situations?

### **Not rocket science**

As with anything, there is a middle ground. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realise that providing children with opportunities and support helps them to gain experiences, confidence and networks that they wouldn't be offered in more adverse settings. But there is an important line between supporting children and wrapping them in gold-plated cotton wool.

Allowing children freedom to take appropriate risks through outdoor play is essential for their development. Risky play does not mean placing children in grave danger, but instead allowing them to be children – climbing, jumping from heights and hanging upside down are good examples. Risky play allows children to test limits and solve problems. And, yes, this includes learning what happens when they overstretch themselves and fall.

But what about the abduction risk? Won't children who are allowed outside unsupervised be kidnapped? Highly unlikely. Despite headlines suggesting otherwise, the risk of child abduction has not increased from approximately a 0.0005% chance since data was first collected in the 1970s. And children are actually far more likely to be abducted by someone they know (even a parent) than the feared stranger lurking in the shadows.

Aside from risk, constantly intervening and providing opportunities for children is not good for their development. We may have forgotten it in our hot, hazy memories, but it is normal – and beneficial – for children to be bored. Boredom enhances creativity and problem solving, whereas constant input dulls imagination – even if that includes creative classes.

Continually hovering and doing things for children may also backfire. Children whose parents frequently intervene are more likely to experience anxiety. Although the link is not necessarily causal, being constantly rescued is likely to reduce your confidence. Meanwhile, when children play alone they meet challenges – and learn to solve problems, honing their creativity skills in the process.

These early interactions may also have long-term consequences. Research with college students has found that the higher the degree of parental “helicoptering”, the greater the risk of student depression and anxiety. On the flip side, those students who are used to their parents enabling everything, are more likely to display traits of narcissism and entitlement. Anxiety is not good, but neither is overconfidence and an expectation that life should be easy.

Having said all of that, parental involvement, particularly from warm, loving but firm parents, is of course beneficial. While having confidence in their own abilities may contribute to a child's sense of security, so will having supportive parents. And let's not forget that although abductions may not have risen, the amount of traffic has, and freedom and risks need to be appropriate.

Striking the right balance may seem more complicated than it has to be. Over 50 years ago, paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott introduced the concept of “good enough parenting”. He showed that parents who were loving and provided a stimulating environment – but also set boundaries and didn't stress about doing enough – had children with the best outcomes.

Perhaps Winnicott was blinded by nostalgia thinking back to long, hot summers. But many experts today still believe it's a strategy that makes a lot of sense for raising secure and independent children.

*<http://theconversation.com/helicopter-or-lawnmower-modern-parenting-styles-can-get-in-the-way-of-raising-well-balanced-children-81060>*

# Illusion of control: Why the world is full of buttons that don't work

Written by Jacopo Prisco

Have you ever pressed the pedestrian button at a crosswalk and wondered if it really worked? Or bashed the "close door" button in an elevator, while suspecting that it may, in fact, have no effect whatsoever?

You're not alone, and you may be right. The world is full of buttons that don't actually do anything. They're sometimes called "placebo buttons" -- buttons that are mechanically sound and can be pushed, but provide no functionality. Like placebo pills, however, these buttons may still serve a purpose, according to Ellen Langer, a Harvard psychologist who pioneered a concept known as the "illusion of control."

"They do have a psychological effect," she said in a phone interview. "Taking some action leads people to feel a sense of control over a situation, and that feels good, rather than just being a passive bystander." "Doing something typically feels better than doing nothing."

## Don't walk

In New York City, only about 100 of the 1,000 crosswalk buttons actually function, confirmed a spokesperson from the city's Department of Transportation in an email. That number has steadily decreased in recent years: When the New York Times revealed that the majority of New York's buttons didn't work in 2004, about 750 were still operational.

Worsening traffic may be behind the shift. Crosswalk signals were generally installed before congestion had reached today's levels, and, over time, they started to interfere with the complex coordination of traffic lights. But while their function was taken over by more advanced systems -- such as automated lights or traffic sensors -- the physical buttons were often kept, rather than being replaced at further expense.

Other cities, such as Boston, Dallas and Seattle, have gone through a similar process, leaving them with their own placebo pedestrian buttons. In London, which has 6,000 traffic signals, pressing the pedestrian button results in a reassuring "Wait" light. But that doesn't necessarily mean that the "green man" -- or "pedestrian stage," in traffic signal design terminology -- will appear any sooner.

"We do have some crossings where the green light comes on automatically, but we still ask people to press the button because that enables accessible features," said Glynn Barton, director of network management at Transport for London, in a phone interview.

These features, such as tactile paving and audible traffic signals, help people with visual impairments cross the road and are only activated when the button is pressed. As for the lights, a growing number of them are now integrated into an electronic system that detects traffic and adjusts intervals accordingly (giving priority to buses if they're running late, for example), which means that pressing the button has no effect.

Others, meanwhile, only respond to the button at certain times of day.

"But, in the majority of cases, pressing the button will call the pedestrian stage," said Barton.

## **Close the door?**

So what about the most jabbed button of them all: the "close door" in elevators? If you live in the US, it almost certainly doesn't work.

"To put it simply, the riding public will not be able to make the doors close any faster using that button," said Kevin Brinkman of the National Elevator Industry in an email.

But there's a very good reason for this: the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. "This legislation required that an elevator's doors remain open long enough for anyone with disability or mobility issues, such as using crutches or a wheelchair, to get on board the cab safely," said Brinkman.

So, unless the allotted boarding time has been reached, pressing the button will do nothing. It's only there for firefighters, emergency personnel and maintenance workers, who can override the delay with a key or a code.

Outside the US, there's a higher chance -- though not a certainty -- that the button will work.

"The functionality of the button -- whether or not it actually closes the door sooner -- is determined by the building code or customer," said Robin Fiala of Otis, the world's largest manufacturer of elevators, in an email.

## **Too hot to handle**

Thermostats in hotel rooms are known to limit the temperature range available to users, thus reducing energy costs. The practice isn't limited to hotels, according to Robert Bean of the American Society of Heating and Air-Conditioning Engineers. But that's not strictly a bad thing, because air temperature, which is what most thermostats control, is just one piece of the thermal puzzle.

"In absence of controlling the other metrics, air temperature often makes a poor proxy for thermal comfort," he said. In other words: Full control doesn't necessarily equate to more comfort. Sometimes, however, thermostats can be deceptive by design. Some models even include a "placebo function" option. "Thermal comfort research demonstrates that when people have perceived temperature control over their spaces, some may tolerate higher levels of discomfort," said Bean.

"If a non-functioning (placebo) thermostat or limited function thermostat is installed, just having the option to manipulate it can affect one's perception."

Dummy thermostats -- those not wired into the system at all -- can also be found in offices, according to Donald Prather of Air Conditioning Contractors of America.

"(They) were placed there to quiet a constant complainer by giving them control," he said in an email. "As an engineering trainee I was sent to calibrate one. When I asked why they had me calibrate a thermostat that was not hooked up, they panicked and asked if I told the occupant it wasn't hooked up.

"After assuring them I hadn't spilled the beans, they admitted that, by not telling me it was disconnected, they thought I would put on a more realistic calibration show."

## **Good buttons**

According to Langer, placebo buttons have a net positive effect on our lives, because they give us the illusion of control -- and something to do in situations where the alternative would be doing nothing (which explains why people press the elevator call button when it's already lit). In the case of pedestrian crossings, they may even make us safer by forcing us to pay attention to our surroundings. And ultimately, pressing a button doesn't require much effort.

"When you think about it, it's such a small response that, even if it doesn't have any effect, it hardly has a cost," Langer said. "I think it's a shame if people call it a 'placebo button' and, by that name, think that people are behaving foolishly. Hidden in that (term), is the belief that people are foolish for pressing them -- or mean for putting buttons there that serve no purpose in the first place. "They serve a psychological purpose at the very least," she added, "and sometimes they do have an effect."

*<https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/placebo-buttons-design/index.html>*

## **“Positive thinking” has turned happiness into a duty and a burden, says a Danish psychologist**

By Olivia Goldhill

Everyone wants you to be happy: Self-help books dish out advice on how to stop worrying, boost happiness, and banish negative thoughts; bosses want to see smiling enthusiasm in the workplace; and the only way to respond to “how are you?” is with a joyful “great!” But according to Svend Brinkmann, a psychology professor at Denmark’s Aalborg University, the culture of positivity has a dark side.

Happiness is simply not the appropriate response to many situations in life, says Brinkmann, whose Danish bestseller *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze* is published in English by international publisher Polity this month. Even worse, faking it can leave us emotionally stunted.

“I believe our thoughts and emotions should mirror the world. When something bad happens, we should be allowed to have negative thoughts and feelings about it because that’s how we understand the world,” he says.

“Life is wonderful from time to time, but it’s also tragic. People die in our lives, we lose them, if we have only been accustomed to being allowed to have positive thoughts, then these realities can strike us even more intensely when they happen—and they will happen.”

There’s nothing wrong with those who have a naturally sunny disposition or who enjoy the odd self-help book, says Brinkmann. The problem is when happiness becomes a requisite. In the workplace, for example, where performance reviews often insist on focusing on positive growth rather than genuine difficulties, demanding displays of happiness is “almost totalitarian.” Brinkmann likens insistence on employee happiness to “thought control.”

In the US, mandatory happiness became the subject of an official workplace ruling against T-Mobile in May 2016, where the National Labor Review Board determined that employers cannot force employees to be consistently cheery. All the same, many companies spend huge sums of money trying to ensure employee happiness, and not out of altruism. “When you engage with people and you work in teams, then these personality traits become much more important. That’s why we put much more emphasis on them, because we want to exploit humans and their emotional lives,” says Brinkmann. “I think this is a dark side of positivity. Our feelings tend to become commodities and that means we’re very easily alienated from our feelings.”

Mandatory happiness isn’t simply a concern in the workplace. While it makes sense to give a ritualistic “good, thanks” when someone asks how you are in passing, there’s a risk that our positive public faces are increasingly dominating social spheres. After all, while a witty, vivacious atmosphere can be enjoyable, polite positivity shouldn’t prohibit discussion of traumas and crises with close friends.

Tied up in the pressure to be happy is, of course, the self-help craze. Self-help books that purport to teach people how to find happiness could encourage a harmful perspective on emotions, says Brinkmann. The underlying idea that anyone can make herself feel happy implies that unhappy people are to blame for their own misfortune.

Ultimately, negative emotions play an important and healthy role in how we understand and react to the world. Guilt and shame are essential to a sense of morality. Anger is a legitimate response to injustice. Sadness helps us process tragedy. And happiness is great too. Just not all the time.

*<https://qz.com/924103/happiness-has-become-an-emotional-burden-says-a-danish-psychologist-svend-brinkmann/>*

## Should we stop reading into authors' lives and get back to their books?

*Nell Stevens*

There are so many good writers whose politics and opinions leave us queasy about enjoying their work, though more would object to VS Naipaul than Charles Dickens. But is a story also a celebration of its author?

As soon as the news of VS Naipaul's death broke a few weeks ago, a thousand think pieces rose as one, as though to take his place. His legacy was both attacked and defended, his misogyny and racism condemned and forgiven. This frenzied conversation crystallised around a question readers have been grappling with for years, but with increasing urgency: to what extent should we consider an artist's personality, politics and ethics relevant to our appreciation of their work?

It seems that almost no one can separate the writer from the books when it comes to Naipaul. The same is true of our response to work by authors who have recently been accused of various levels of misconduct following #metoo. In the past week alone, compelling and devastating reports of abuse by lauded authors have appeared in the media: Gwyn Conger Steinbeck, John Steinbeck's second wife, detailed his sadism and womanising in a memoir that has recently come to light; author Joyce Maynard has written of her experiences with JD Salinger, who summoned her to live with him when she was 18 and he was 53.

Practical criticism – the academic approach to texts that aims to consider words on the page independently of their author or the reader's preconceived ideas – began almost 100 years ago; now, in 2018, such “death of the author” talk appears to be dead itself. While the takes on Naipaul were diverse, and some argued that Naipaul's bad character was irrelevant to his work, the fact of his bad character was always front and centre. It could not go unmarked – but what remains to be decided is the extent to which it marks the legacy of a Nobel prize-winning author.

I am in favour of removing monuments erected to celebrate individuals whose life work was to destroy the happiness or lives of others. I think the statue of white supremacist Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford, belongs in a museum with a lengthy note about Rhodes's horrific legacy and the cultural circumstances under which the statue was first erected. The same is true of the many tributes across the US to Robert E Lee. But a book is not a statue. A story is not necessarily a tribute to, or celebration of, its author. I am left reaching, instead, for the correct metaphor to evoke the relationship between work and creator. Is a book its author's child, innocent of its parent's wrongdoing? Or is it a hologram of its creator, representing all that its author was and did? Of course neither of these is correct; I'm still searching for an analogy that lies between these two extremes.

Naipaul, born more than 50 years before I was, is a man from a very different age, but one that nonetheless overlapped with my own. I find many of his views offensive, laughable or both; his racism and treatment of women were sickening. I could say the same, however, of Dickens, a callous womaniser who, after the Indian rebellion of 1857, declared, “I wish I were Commander in Chief in India ... I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race ... to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the Earth.” Yet he retains his reputation as an

avuncular, charming writer; a national treasure who invented Christmas as we know it. I still admire Dickens's novels. How do I justify accepting one of these men and not the other?

Is there a historical cutoff point after which we start to object to the politics, behaviour or ethics of authors? If so, it has tended to fall sometime after Dickens's death. Ezra Pound was a fascist, Pablo Neruda a rapist, Philip Larkin an antisemite; we are increasingly aware of these facts and the ways they affect our reading of their work. But perhaps we are now dissolving that vague historical line altogether, finding fault with the even-longer-gone. Emily Brontë was recently criticised here for having been a difficult person. Male authors are being held to account for their sexual crimes and bigotry; women, in general, for not being charming.

If Emily Brontë is now fair game, then with sadness, I have to admit that my own favourite author, the Victorian novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, should be, too. She was a social reformer in her lifetime, whose books offered such sympathetic portrayals of those condemned by Victorian society that two of her friends burned them. She cared deeply about improving the lives of those around her. And she was also a gossip and a prude. She was rude in her letters about George Eliot, whose cohabitation with the married George Henry Lewes was much talked about at the time. In 1859, when Eliot's identity as the author of *Adam Bede* and *Scenes from Clerical Life* was revealed, Gaskell wrote to Eliot to express her admiration, but could not hide her disapproval even in what was essentially a fan letter. "I should not be quite true in my ending, if I did not say before I concluded that I wish you were Mrs Lewes," she wrote. Mrs Gaskell made no attempt to separate her response to Eliot's books from her response to Eliot's perceived wrongdoings.

In my reading of Mrs Gaskell, and my writing about her in my book *Mrs Gaskell and Me*, I have wholeheartedly embraced the inseparability of her life and work. While I admire her novels, it was when I read her correspondence that I became fascinated by her. Her letters are gossipy and witty, busy and enthusiastic about pleasure; I love the way they lay her faults and foibles bare. Before I had read them, I thought of her merely as just another Victorian writer whose novels I enjoyed. Afterwards, she became a distinct and beloved character in my imagination. My interest in her is fuelled as much by her personality (if not more) than her creative outputs. I feel so close to Mrs Gaskell that I think of her, now, as a kind of friend.

So to consider the author as relevant and as worthy a subject as her novels means I cannot ignore the fact that she would have despised me and the kind of life I lead, one far more scandalous by Victorian standards than anything Eliot achieved. An audience member at a reading of my book recently asked me what Gaskell would have thought of #MeToo; I dodged the question entirely, because the answer could not be that she would have supported it, certainly not without much equivocation and discomfort. In many ways, it is an unfair exercise: dragging Mrs Gaskell out of her time and asking her to pass comment on our own.

I have more questions than answers about all of this. All I can offer is what I have learned from carrying my own warped, subjective version of Mrs Gaskell in my head. It seems to me that we should begin by treating the authors we admire as we would treat people in our lives: that is, on a case by case basis, weighing their good points against their bad, taking into account extenuating circumstances and aggravating factors. The life of the author is never truly irrelevant – but if we accept that, we must also accept the weirdness, discomfort and complexities that follow.

*<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/10/should-we-stop-reading-authors-lives-books-vs-naipaul>*

# To save us from a Kafkaesque future, we must democratise AI

*Stephen Cave*

The history of artificial intelligence is entwined with state and corporate power. It must now reflect those it has excluded

Picture a system that makes decisions with huge impacts on a person's prospects – even decisions of life and death. Imagine that system is complex and opaque: it sorts people into winners and losers, but the criteria by which it does so are never made clear. Those being assessed do not know what data the system has gathered about them, or with what data theirs is being compared. And no one is willing to take responsibility for the system's decisions – everyone claims to be fulfilling their own cog-like function.

This is the vision offered to us by Franz Kafka in his 1915 novel, *The Trial*. In that book, Kafka tells a parodic tale of an encounter with the apparatus of an indifferent bureaucracy. The protagonist, Josef K, does not know why he has been arrested, or what the evidence against him is; no one is willing to take responsibility for the decision, or to give him a proper account of how the system works. And it ends gloomily, with Josef K utterly defeated, resigning himself to his fate.

Fast forward 100 years and artificial intelligence and data-driven computer systems are frequently portrayed in a similar way by their critics: increasingly consequential, yet opaque and unaccountable. This is not a coincidence. There is a direct link between the trials of Josef K and the ethical and political questions raised by artificial intelligence. Contrary to the hype, this technology has not appeared fully formed in the past couple of years. As the historian Jonnie Penn has recently pointed out, it has a long history, one that is deeply entwined with state and corporate power. AI systems were developed largely to further the interests of their funders: governments, military and big business.

Most importantly, the models of decision-making that these systems sought to automate were taken directly from these bureaucracies. The two great pioneers of machine intelligence, Alan Turing and John von Neumann, both developed their prototypes in the crucible of the second world war. Under Von Neumann's oversight, the very first task in 1946 of the very first general-purpose computer, the Eniac, was running computations for the hydrogen bomb.

In other words, the "intelligence" in "artificial intelligence" is not the intelligence of the human individual – not that of the composer, the care worker or the doctor – it is the systemic intelligence of the bureaucracy, of the machine that processes vast amounts of data about people's lives, then categorises them, pigeonholes them, makes decisions about them, and puts them in their place. The problems of AI resemble those of the Kafkaesque state because they are a product of it. Josef K would immediately recognise the "computer says no" culture of our time.

Of course, there are countless ways in which AI and related technologies can be used to empower people: for example, to bring better medical care to more of us, and to provide access to many other services, from digital personal assistants to tailored online learning.

But at the same time, they risk perpetuating injustice because, for all that they are the newest and shiniest of technologies, they also embody the biases of the past – the reductionist systemic thinking and institutional biases of their origins. By default, these Kafkaesque systems will perpetuate existing forms of discrimination, and even exacerbate them – a case in point being Amazon’s now-abandoned recruitment algorithm, which learned from previous records what kind of people the company usually employs, and on the basis of this downgraded new applicants whose CVs indicated they were women.

A crucial step in making the most of AI is therefore to ensure diverse voices are involved in its development and deployment. This means including those who have been excluded from the systems of power from which AI sprang, such as women; or who were colonised by them, such as much of the developing world and numerous communities in the developed world; or who were victimised by them, such as poor or disabled people.

The challenges to this are immense. A report from the World Economic Forum published in December concluded that only 22% of AI professionals globally are women (in the UK only 20%). The situation for people of colour is equally difficult: last month more than 100 researchers were denied visas for travel to Canada to attend NeurIPS, one of the most important AI conferences. Since many were travelling from Africa, this had a particular impact on the “Black in AI” meetings, which aimed to increase representation in the field.

But there is good news, too. Thanks to US-based researcher-activist groups such as the AI Now Institute and the Algorithmic Justice League, the importance of involving marginalised groups is gaining acceptance. In the UK, the newly founded Ada Lovelace Institute has as one of its three core aims to “convene diverse voices” in shaping the future of an AI society. The institute is well-placed to do that: it is independent, yet well enough connected to ensure that those voices are heard; and it can build on the established record of its founder, the Nuffield Foundation, in bringing ethics to science.

Those who have historically been failed by systems of power, such as Kafka – a German-speaking Jew living in Prague – have always been particularly well-placed to recognise their opacity, arbitrariness and unaccountability. Including those voices will therefore ensure that AI makes the future not just more efficient but also more ethical.

*<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/04/future-democratise-ai-artificial-intelligence-power>*