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INTRODUCTION

Or, Why Fat is a Paranoid Issue

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Over the past few years, a new and deadly epidemic has stalked the land.

Britain and the US, just like much of the rest of the world, are getting fat. Around 60 per cent of adults in the UK are heavier than they should be. It's a similar story in the US, where two-thirds of adults are overweight or extremely overweight (obese). That's a pretty shocking statistic, but we all know that keeping in shape when you're trying to balance the demands of work and family life is tough. Who's got time to get to the gym? Who has the energy to do more than heat up a ready meal after ten hours in the office? Besides, we all get bigger as we get older, don't we? It's a metabolism thing—isn't it?

But if you think the statistics for adults are alarming, wait till you find out how our kids are faring. In 2003, 27 per cent of children under 11 in England were either overweight or obese. In the US, where different methods to measure

obesity are used, nearly 20 per cent of children aged 6 to 11 were classified as overweight or obese in 2004. The numbers have almost doubled in a decade.

How did so many children get to be overweight before they've even reached the ripe old age of 11? How do you become overweight when so much of your day is taken up with charging round a playground or park, when you can't drive, and when you're not free—like the rest of us—to stuff your face at will with chocolate, crisps, and alcohol?

The answer, of course, is a complex one. If adults are eating much less healthily than they used to, so are their kids. Instead of spending their evenings playing outside, children now have the delights of multi-channel television, computer games, and the Internet to choose from. And then there's the fact that increasing numbers of us just won't let our children outside on their own.

Back in the mid 1970s, we were 6 years old. There were just three television channels in the UK, no Internet, and no personal computers. (Happy days!) Every weekday we'd walk a mile and a half to and from school, unaccompanied by an adult. Every summer evening, we'd play in the streets, gardens, and parks near our home. There were plenty of other children around, but we didn't see an adult until they came looking for us at bedtime. And we weren't the off-spring of especially uncaring and neglectful parents—pretty much all the kids we knew had the same kind of licence to roam.

Things are a little different today. More than 40 per cent of UK adults questioned in a recent survey thought that fourteen—*fourteen!*—was the earliest age at which children should be allowed to go out unsupervised. Two-thirds of 10-year-olds have never been to a shop or the park by themselves, and fewer than one in ten 8-year-olds walk to school alone. And if you do let your little ones out, you might want to dress them in a GPS tracker jacket so you'll always know where they are—unless, of course, they take the jacket off...

What are we so worried about? It basically boils down to two main concerns: we're afraid of our children being hit by a car, and we're terrified that our children are going to be abducted by a paedophile. And who wouldn't be worried? We can see with our own eyes the huge increase in traffic on our roads over recent years. All of us can call to mind horrific cases of child abduction and murder. The world seems a much more dangerous place today than it did when we were kids. It's a world in which no sane parent should let their child out of their sight. If that means our children adopting the same sedentary lifestyle of so many adults, that's a small price to pay.

In fact, despite all our parental vigilance, the number of children murdered in the UK has remained pretty much constant over the past 30 years—around 60 to 80 per year. In most of those cases, a parent is the principal suspect. In 2006, 55 children were killed in England and Wales;

12 were murdered by strangers. In the US, between 40 and 150 children are abducted and murdered per year (in around 14 per cent of cases, the killer turns out to be the child's parent).

Seventy-one children were run over and killed on UK roads in 2006; 339 under-14s were killed in the US in 2005. In both countries the trend is dramatically downwards (though we don't know for sure whether the primary cause is kids not spending as much time out alone, better road safety education, or some other factor).

Next year approximately 150 children in the UK, and 500 in the US, will die either at the hands of a murderer (including their parents) or as pedestrians in a traffic accident. These are grim statistics, to be sure. But they're a drop in the ocean compared to the risks our kids are running by *not* going out. The number of obese or overweight children in the UK and US runs to millions. The less we exercise, the more likely it is that we'll become overweight. And the more overweight we are, the greater the chances of us developing serious illnesses like cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and arthritis.

So why, when the risks to our children of a sedentary lifestyle are so much greater than the risks of letting them out on their own, do we persist in ferrying them to school and allowing them to spend so much time in their bedrooms playing computer games?

Each parent will have their own take on the issue, of course, and there are likely to be a range of explanations for their attitudes. But part of it is simply that *we're not*

good at comparing risks. We're more frightened of events that almost certainly won't happen (abduction) than things that quite possibly will (obesity). When you think of our fear of paedophiles, what many of us are gripped by is pure and simple *paranoia*.

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Of course, we're not just worried about paedophiles. We're scared of terrorists, muggers, and rapists. We fret about hoodied teenagers and 'feral' youths. Our towns and cities, we are regularly told by the media, have become 'no go zones' on weekend evenings, filled with brawling lager louts. There are reckoned to be more than five million CCTV cameras in Britain—more than 20 per cent of the world's total—but we don't seem to feel any more secure. (CCTV is less prevalent in the US, but becoming increasingly common.) These days you're not even safe from assault in your own car—who wants a knife pulled on them in a road-rage incident? Take a look at the newspaper most days and you could be forgiven for never setting foot outside the house (though that wouldn't save you from marauding burglars).

And that's just the everyday horrors we know about. What about the bad guys we *can't* see. Well, governments and other figures in authority may scoff, but lots of us are pretty sure they're there nonetheless.

Take the Aids epidemic, for example. The scientific consensus is that Aids is caused by the HIV virus, which originated in sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-twentieth