


**SEARCH OVER 120,000 CARS FOR SALE NOW**


 Visit [driving.co.uk](http://driving.co.uk)

THE  TIMES

## The non-pushy parent: how to be a German mum



Sara Zaske with her children Sophia, 8, and Ozzie, 5, in Berlin Gordon Welters

**Sara Zaske**

Published at 12:01AM, March 7 2015

### When Sara Zaske moved to Berlin with her family, she was shocked at how much freedom German children were allowed

In her school notebook, my daughter Sophia has set two goals: to write better letters and to walk home alone. Unfortunately, she's probably not going to reach that second goal — because I won't let her.

My daughter is only eight, and I'm an American mother. Despite living in Germany for the past six years, I have a deep and slightly irrational fear that some kidnapper will pluck her off the streets of Berlin during the 500m walk between her school and our apartment.

I realise the irony. The US is supposedly “the land of the free”, but we Americans tend to treat our children like little prisoners, monitoring their every move in public and restricting what they can be taught in school.

In contrast, German parents are much more relaxed. They place a high value on independence for their children. This means that starting in the second grade, most kids walk to and from school without their parents — even on Berlin's urban streets.

One German parent I know, Susan Sibai, allows her daughters, aged 8 and 11, to take the city bus to and from school every day. The 11-year-old even takes a tram alone to visit friends in other parts of the city. Yet, Sibai says that she's considered to be an overprotective parent because she makes them call her on their mobile phones when they arrive at their destination.

Heidi Keller, a German cultural development psychologist, doesn't find this behaviour alarming at all.

“Most young parents find it important that their children are independent,” she says. “They can go to school, take the bus, ride a bike, but parents train their children until they are comfortable to do it on their own. I think it's important to function as an individual without the help of others.”

Keller is German, but she is far from alone in her views. In fact, by not letting their children walk alone, parents may be doing damage, making them more dependent and hurting their development.

I understand this, at least intellectually, and I've tried to take advantage of the many opportunities Germany presents to foster my children's independence: my son Ozzie, now five, spent the night at his kindergarten when he was only four, and starting at age six, my daughter has gone on a week-long *klassenfahrt* (class trip) with her entire class every year.

Still, I draw the line at walking alone around Berlin, even though as a child I remember running free through my own suburban neighbourhood near Buffalo, New York. The only rule I had was to stay within earshot so my mother could shout from the backyard window that it was time for dinner. (That same mother, now a grandmother, recently asked me to promise never to let my daughter walk to school by herself.)

British mums have told me similar stories of playing outside until the street lights came on or going to shops by themselves. But now, as parents, they're almost as scared as I am. According to the Policy Studies Institute, in 2013 only a quarter of English primary school children were allowed to walk home from school alone, compared with 86 per cent in 1971.

What happened? Did the world really get that much more dangerous? Sensational stories and distorted statistics have certainly contributed to our fear. For instance, we're told that 800,000 children go missing a year in the US, and 250,000 in the EU. Those are large numbers, but what doesn't always come across is that most of those cases are runaways or kidnappings by family members involved in a custody dispute.

The stereotypical "stranger abduction" — every parent's nightmare — is extremely rare. There were 115 such cases in one year in the US, according to the Department of Justice. And of all the calls to the missing children's 116 000 hotline in Europe, only 2 per cent involve abductions by someone who is not a parent or guardian, according to the group Missing Children Europe.

So these are not huge numbers, yet each of these horrible tragedies looms large enough to change how much freedom parents give their children. In America, it has become so bad that a couple in Silver Spring, Maryland, Danielle and Alexander Meitiv, recently faced a child neglect charge after letting their ten-year-old son and six-year-old daughter walk home alone from a public park. Granted it was a mile, but Silver Spring, a suburb of Washington DC, is not exactly a war zone.

Such a reaction by the authorities would be unheard of in Berlin, and, I imagine, in most of Germany. It's not as if German parents ignore the potential for bad things to happen. When it comes to their children, they're also worried, but they try not to let it interfere with their children's right to independence. "The smartest thing to do is to let go a little bit," Sibai said, "and make sure they go to karate class."

### **Luck favours the prepared**

German parents don't just fling their children into the wild streets. Parents and schools make a special effort to teach skills such as traffic safety that they'll need to navigate in the real world. My children have also had age-appropriate lessons on how to be aware of predators.

To my surprise, my daughter has also had lessons on subjects that would be unheard of in America: sex, religion, and even death. I've swallowed my concerns, and I'm starting to see how well it works.

When my daughter was seven, I was astonished to learn that she knew the basics of sex. Her teacher had read the whole class the German translation of a funny picture book called *Mummy Laid an Egg!* by English author Babette Cole (published in the UK in 1994). If a grade school teacher did that in the US, there would probably be an uproar among parents, followed by a media circus, then a lawsuit. Many Americans feel strongly that parents, not teachers, should control when and how children are told about sex.

German parents don't seem to feel that same need to control what their children learn. If we stay in Berlin, Sophia will learn a lot more about sex from school as she gets older, since Germany has comprehensive sex education. And I'm OK with that, because this preparation will help her to deal better with the risks she'll face as a young adult. According to statistics compiled by the American organisation Planned Parenthood, in Germany, the teenage birth rate is three-and-a-half times lower than that in the US. The teenage abortion rate is about four-and-a-half times lower and the HIV prevalence rate is three-and-a-half times lower.

### **Everything in the right time**

That's not to say everything is rushed in German childhoods — some things are rather slow, like academic studies. Most children in the US and UK are now learning to read in pre-school, but in Berlin, the kids wait until first grade, which they usually start at six, when they all learn together. Contrary to my childhood education, which involved six hours or more behind a desk in a classroom, my daughter has a half-day of instruction at a public Montessori-style school, with plenty of time for self-directed *freiarbeit*, where the children can work on what they like, and two outdoor recesses.

A British friend, Sarah Winborn, told me about the academic pressure that exists in the UK, with parents using flashcards on preschoolers and pretty much teaching kids "from the moment they are born". But since moving to Berlin and having children of her own, Winborn, a photographer who runs an online group for expat parents, has become a convert.

Share via

“I think the pressure is too great in the UK,” she says. “They definitely should ease up on young children, give them a chance to learn through play and let them be children longer.”

She also points out that starting school earlier doesn't necessarily mean that a child will do better. In fact, despite all that extra pressure, US and UK students were well behind their German peers in a 2012 assessment of reading, maths and science by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

## The German way

I don't mean to suggest that Germany is a parenting utopia or that all German parents are the same. However, there's something going on here in the capital of Germany that parents elsewhere could learn from.

The support for children in Berlin is phenomenal, beginning with a generous three years of maternity and paternity leave, to subsidised preschool and after-school care, and the numerous parks and affordable sports and activities for kids.

There's also a communal attitude around children, which perhaps doesn't exist anymore in the US and the UK. Despite my fear about some crazy person abducting my kids, I take comfort that most of the people with whom my children interact — teachers, friends, neighbours, even the people who work in the local shops — are actually looking out for them.

Take this story from Lor Ather, a British expat mum. Her four-year-old son and his father went to a local park and the boy suddenly took off and hid really well. Frantic, his father ran home to get Ather to help search for him. But by the time the two set off to the park, a woman, a stranger, was already bringing him to their home.

“I don't know where else somebody would do that,” Ather said.

## German parenting: the rules

### Let kids play naked

On the beach and in city splash parks, most German toddlers never see the business end of a bathing suit.

### Focus on fun

Enjoy more time to play before the start of school. Berlin's Kitas (kindergartens), which generally care for children aged one to five, focus on play and social skills, not on reading and maths.

### Let them walk alone

German schoolchildren often walk to and from school, parks and friends' homes all by themselves.

### Send kids to the shops

A child as young as six or seven buying bread at the local bakery is not an uncommon sight in Berlin.

### Let them have knives

Instead of being forbidden, children are taught how to use dangerous things such as knives, building tools and matches responsibly.

### Celebrate Einschulung

The start of school is celebrated as one of the most important events in a child's life. As part of the German tradition of Einschulung (enrolment), new first-graders get two big parties, one at their new school and one with family, and they are presented with a Zuckertüte, a huge cone filled with sweets and gifts.

### Sleepovers at three

German children go on overnight trips from a surprisingly young age. Week-long class trips are common in Berlin schools, and Kitas often hold overnights with children as young as three or four.

### Talk about sex

German children learn about the real world. Schools don't shy away from controversial topics such as sex and religion.

### Send kids outside

There's an old saying: “There is no bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.” And the Germans mean it.

### Let them have fireworks

German children let off fireworks on New Year's Eve. I still think this one is totally crazy. No way am I letting my kids outside during the city-wide explosion-fest Berlin calls Silvester.

1 comment

 Sara Zaske



5 people listening



+ Follow

Post comment

Newest | Oldest | Most Recommended

Mike TC

7 hours ago

A much more sensible and rational style of parenting. UK parents have become almost obsessive and overprotective about their children, which is not promoting independence and personal responsibility. You don't stifle someone you love, you work to set them free and in so doing they are likely to return more often through choice rather than through reluctant ,perceived obligation

By continuing to use the site, you agree to the use of cookies. You can change this and find out more by following this link.

2 Accept Cookies [ly](#)

Livefyre

© Times Newspapers Limited 2015 | Version 5.13.0.2(137029)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF

[My Account](#) | [Editorial Complaints](#) | [RSS](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#) | [The Times Whisky Club](#) | [Encounters Dating](#) | [Sunday Times Wine Club](#) | [Privacy & Cookie Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#) | [iPhone](#) | [Android smartphone](#) | [Android tablet](#) | [Kindle](#) | [Kindle Fire](#) | [Place an announcement in The Times](#) | [Sunday Times Driving](#) | [The Times Bookshop](#) | [Times Tutorials](#) | [Times Currency Services](#) | [Times Print Gallery](#) | [Handpicked Collection](#)