

In the Interest of Childhood

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“Security is mostly superstition. It does not exist in nature nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.” ---Helen Keller

I grew up in Michigan in the 50's and 60's-you know-the good old days. Every generation has their own perception of the good old days so you may now roll your eyes if you like. We played outside most of the time. Frankly, indoors was BORING and, if you were anywhere within eyesight of a grown up you were soon relegated to something we called chores. So we steered clear and spent most of our time outdoors even in the dead of winter (remember I said Michigan, same as FRIGID). We didn't have much in the way of toys and entertainment that would keep us indoors anyway. Our swing was an old tire from my dad's milk delivery truck tied to a heavy rope, which broke once and sent me crashing to the ground splitting my lip. My mother said, "It'll get better by the time you get married." It did. I had a bike and a pair of roller skates; the kind that are now in antique stores. We shared a wagon. My older brother was the best wagon puller in the neighborhood. Once, while one of his lucky passengers, the wagon flipped over into a fire hydrant. I split my head open that time. My parents didn't believe in going to the hospital unless you were being born or dying. Seeing as I wasn't doing either of these my dad used a pair of old scissors to cut away some of my hair and put a butterfly type of bandage on it. True to my mother's word, it healed well before I got married.

My childhood was filled with made up games, hopscotch, jumping rope, sand lot baseball, tag, hide and seek and just plain running around and going crazy. The adults for the most part stayed on the outskirts knowing that we would be home by dinner or at least by time the street lights came on.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that things have changed and childhood right along with everything else. While kids have great advantages these days the one thing that they don't have is free time. Organized sports, technology, formal lessons and hours of homework compete for our children's free time. I see the difference between my older sons, in their mid-twenties, and their sister who is twelve. As a parent, I am always trying to balance her busy-'ness' with the fact that she is still a kid and needs to be doing kid things as well as family things.

While growing up we didn't have air conditioning to make indoors attractive or child predators living down the street. We knew where we could go, which was pretty much everywhere, and where the kids our age lived. There were undeveloped lots, ponds in spring to catch millions of pollywogs and trees to climb. The grown-ups kept a look out for every child although we never had the sense of being watched. Let's face it we need to keep our kids close these days. As a result childhood is transforming into something as artificial as artificial turf itself (don't even get me started on that one!). As our technology expands and adult fears regarding safety and success intensifies, childhood is morphing into something that resembles pre-Victorian times when children were treated more as miniature adults rather than as developing human beings. So what do we do? We need to have serious dialogue with our city planners and be proactive. Ball parks and skate parks are only part of the answer. We all need to have access to natural surroundings. Parks and places for running, rolling in the grass, and climbing trees. Children need to have access to the outdoors, not in an organized way but actually in an unorganized, wild way. Over the past year I have seen at least 3 articles referencing the great work of Richard Louv in his book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder." I read this book two years ago. It is on the top of my list of books everyone should read regarding children. This is one of many books that have been written in the past 30 years addressing the over-scheduling of children's lives, the loss of childhood and its implications for our children and us.

Bugs, dirt, sticks, rocks are not horrible things. Dirty, yes, Horrible, no. My mother would simply hose us down at the back door then throw us into the tub to finish up the job. We place too much emphasis on keeping kids clean at the loss of real and necessary life experiences and exploration. Childhood was never meant to be clean and if it is then there isn't much going on upstairs. We learn about balance from falling or near falling experiences. I was fascinated recently by an article which compared two toddler aged children. One child walked over uneven ground comfortably and with confidence while the other had great difficulty. The director of this program, a Professor in Brazil, told a visiting mother that her daughter was not developing the adequate information in her brain to understand balance because she was not being given access to uneven ground. During a family camping trip I watched as 3 children played with nothing more than pebbles, a small mound of dirt and small sticks stuck into the mound. They were absolutely filthy. One of the children said, "You have to sing Happy Birthday to me now. Count to 17 'cuz that's all you get." You can't duplicate this kind of learning and social interaction in any kind of laboratory or workbook.

Quoting from Louv:

"Modern life narrows our senses until our focus is mostly visual, appropriate to about the dimension of a computer monitor or TV screen. By contrast, nature accentuates all the senses, and the senses are a child's primal first link of self-defense. Children with generous exposure to nature, those who learn to see the world directly, *may* be more likely to develop the psychological survival skills that will help them detect real danger, and they are therefore less likely to seek out phony danger in life. Play in nature may instill instinctual confidence."

Children invent knowledge through their play. They discover their humanity, their connectedness to one another and their community. They learn language, science, math, and yes, even literacy. You have to take risks in order to learn and children's play is all about risk taking. Through real, unabated play children learn about politics, taking turns, friendship, rules, commitment, fairness, and competition. In my own childhood experiences, we divided and re-divided into teams and tribes. We chased one another and were chased until we could chase no more, then, almost on cue, we collapsed on to the first grassy lawn we found and waited for the stars to announce that it was time to head home. We made up rules, broke rules and suffered the consequences of it all.

Somehow we must provide these same experiences and opportunities to our children. We can do this. We have proven our inventiveness and creativity time and again; it's our wisdom that has me worried. The greatest gift we can possibly give this generation of children is their own childhood. We may have to fence it in a bit but I truly believe we can do it. The question is do we have the heart and determination?

(Rebecca Tree is the Director and Founder of Roots & Wings Child Development. Unedited versions of past articles can be found on the school website rootsandwingsmedford.com)

Here is a list of books that I love and feel are important.

- 1. Last Child In The Woods: Saving Our children From Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv.*
- 2. Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement Oriented Society by William Crane.*
- 3. In Defense of Childhood: Protecting Kid's Inner Wildness by Chris Mercogliano.*
- 4. Hothouse Kids: How the Pressure to Succeed Threatens Childhood by Alissa Quart.*
- 5. The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need wild Places by Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble.*
- 6. The Disappearance of Childhood by Neil Postman.*