



Education

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Julia Steiny: At the summer family picnic, a feast of informal learning

01:00 AM EDT on Sunday, May 30, 2010



My husband and I were out strolling in the sweet, new-summer weather when we heard a wild pack of kids shrieking as they spilled out of the woods and onto our path.

The pack, maybe 10 boys and girls at various elementary-school ages, charged around a bend, brandishing sticks at the imaginary dragons or monsters they were hunting with blood thirst. We came upon each other so suddenly the pack had to slow down to avoid crashing into us. We stepped to one side, and as they trotted past at a comfortable distance, one brave leader aimed her weapon straight at us and growled ferociously. I smiled to let them know their game was fine with me, which invited others to threaten us en masse before running off to fight their foes.

But a boy bringing up the rear stopped in his tracks to indulge in extra snarling, barking and waving his woodland broadsword at us. It seemed appropriate to roar back, which disarmed him so completely, he beamed with surprise. Then, pleased about getting a rise out of someone, he joined the others, whooping with special triumph.

Moments later, we came to a camping area where a large multifamily celebration was under way. Men tended smoking grills and two picnic tables, laden with paper goods, condiments and side dishes, were set to handle the crowd. Soulful Mexican ballads floated from speakers, giving the laughter and chatter a slow, salsa beat. Babies were in arms or strollers, but ambulatory kids were outta there, free to maraud the woods, until they got hungry or were called to eat.

A big party-store image of a graduate, tacked on a tree, proclaimed congratulations.

I wondered if, should the graduate become middle class, he or she would still call up the extended family to meet to celebrate events. Or would they join the increasing numbers per Robert Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone," and retreat into more private, selective parties free of the alcoholic brother-in-law, the labor-intensive old people,

or the aunt and uncle who bicker maddeningly. For better or worse, these big gatherings showed kids how the wider world expected them to behave.

My own family of origin participated in lots of multifamily gatherings. My parents and their friends would pick a public park or beach, call everyone up, figure out who was bringing what, and then show up at the appointed hour. On these occasions, the moms referred all kid problems to the men, who minded the kids by organizing games and projects such as building sand-castle compounds. We learned that men had different solutions to problems than moms. And that some dads were totally fun and others kind of scary.

On Sunday afternoons, my grandmother's six siblings and their extended families met at her house. We learned that to be adored, like Uncle George, you had to be sweet to everyone, even to the two old ladies to whom the other men were brutal. Aunt Corkie fascinated us, with her leaden false eyelashes and over-painted mouth, chatting gaily while leaning seductively against the wall next to the sink where my dad washed the only dishes I ever saw him wash.

"No matter how much money you think a man has," warned my mother on such occasions, "don't marry one 25 years older, or that will be you," gesturing toward the attention-starved flirt. Henceforth, when older men seemed attractive, Corkie loomed.

Actually, the one troubling feature of the pack storming around Lincoln Woods was that no one had taught the kids how to run with sticks. If you're running with something pointy in your hand, hold your hand out to the side to minimize the damage if you do fall. Doesn't everyone know this?

Well, no. And this is the point. With the steep decline of multi-age gatherings again, according to Putnam's data and what we all know to be the case, no one is passing on the basic skills that we learned in the course of everyday childhood from our concerned uncle or most often, from some older kid. Now many kids don't know how to play rock, paper, scissors to settle disputes or decide who picks the teams. They don't even know eenie, meenie, minie, mo. Under such circumstances, how to run with sticks becomes advanced learning.

Some cities are starting to hire "playworkers" to befriend kids in public playgrounds, to pass on these skills. These days, lots of kids have no idea what to do with unstructured time. Chase imaginary monsters or create a game? They've never seen it happen.

People used to amuse themselves with other people much more than they do now. People were mainly what there was to play with. Now we have a massive entertainment industry supplying our "recreational needs." The ill effect is that kids are cut off from rich informal learning.

So the lesson here is twofold: First, everyone should gather more often. Invite the wacky cousins. They're a fabulous learning experience, however annoying. Model the good practice of creating big family and community bosoms where Grandma's disapproval of the new boyfriend can be heard and considered, if not taken to heart.

Second, notice what the kids don't seem to know, and make sure they learn it. Make sure the kids in your extended realm know how to run with sticks, among other things. Help them avoid marring lovely memories of summer cookouts that make time for tearing around the woods in a happy pack, while Mom gets to talk to grownups.

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6/2/2010

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