



Education



Julia Steiny: Unstructured outdoor play is in danger of extinction

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When my kids were little, we moved to an urban neighborhood where older children played dodge ball in the middle of the block during good weather. They had rules about yelling “car” when you saw one, grabbing the ball and quickly getting to the sidewalk. The group, quite diverse in all respects, initiated newcomers and worked out their own disagreements. The boys in particular went about as a pack, settling into a sandbox for a while, riding bikes and banging together scrap-wood projects. They watched some TV at other kids’ houses — we didn’t have one — but mostly they hung out and found ways to entertain themselves.

That was well over 20 years ago. My block has new kids, but dodge ball is gone. No one plays in the street. I don’t know where the kids play, or even if they do, in the sense of exploring ways to amuse themselves, without being entertained by electronic media or by activities structured by adults.

A group of people passionately concerned about the decline of play in modern childhood made a PBS documentary called *Where do the Children Play?* The Alliance for Childhood is hosting showings of the video nationally, to spur interest in the topic. Their local partner, the Providence Children’s Museum, recently organized a showing at Highlander School, after which a panel led a discussion with a good-sized audience strongly concerned, as is the film itself, with children losing the experience of unstructured, fooling-around, pointless play.

The documentary shows how childhood has moved indoors to TV, Internet, Xboxes and texting. Outdoor play tends to be sports with adult-imposed rules and a focus on winning and losing. The outdoors itself has become an abstraction called nature, a subject often made dull by schools with little imagination. Recess is disappearing. Parents are crazed about their kids’ safety, fearing “stranger danger” even when hard evidence argues that the much-feared kidnappings barely exist. And parents want every moment of their kids’ free time invested in improving their ability to compete — in sports, for college admissions, for prestigious honors.

Aimless exploration of the natural world, with other kids, is dying out.

The beginning of the documentary introduces us to children exploring the lovely landscape of Beaver Island, off the shore of Lake Michigan. Their families fish and farm. The kids have the run of the place. Everyone knows everyone else. The video tells us that the kids use computers and the Internet for homework, but not

for social networking or games. So it's a throwback culture, without malls, where kids can wander freely, have tons of time to do so and suffer the consequences of their misjudgments without also initiating lawsuits.

But get real. Everywhere else modern life is competitive, hurried, and litigious.

The video presents the opinions of various experts on the cost of kids losing the opportunity to play. Psychologists argue that truly healthy kids need unstructured time and natural spaces where they can interact with the world on their own, without adult adjudicators. On their own, kids learn who they are and what they're drawn to do.

Richard Louv, inventor of the idea of "nature-deficit disorder," also agrees that kids lost in electronic media are divorced from a natural world they'll never learn to care about.

The PBS documentary makes the point that urban neighborhoods are often more conducive to fool-around play than the seemingly leafier suburban ones. Dense housing patterns allow kids to have each other for palling around. Of course, in truly unsafe urban neighborhoods, parents keep kids indoors, which is the worst situation of all. But reasonably-safe city streets give children a place to explore on their own, and the challenge of making up games and stuff to do together.

Conversely, the video shows us suburban kids in a minivan glued to a movie screen as they drive past trees and gardens. One boy explains, with big-hearted liberalism, that the outdoors is fine. He rides his Razor scooter, but — and he brightened visibly — the computers are indoors.

He plays alone, and mainly within the highly structured world of electronic games. The world of cyberspace is addictively fascinating, as compared with the natural world that has no easy-to-learn games or predetermined objectives. After all, what do you DO in nature? What's the point?

With a bit of Michael Moore vividness, the documentary visits a Rainforest Café, a restaurant chain of loud, over-stimulating entertainment pretending to be nature. The animatronics animals move and growl. A TV ad asserts that you'll learn what a real rain forest looks like, and feel what a rain forest feels like. Without humidity or insects, mind you. Nature commercialized for consumption and profit. It is creepy.

The Alliance for Childhood is trying to give momentum to a movement that turns back our nature-fearing play-aversion. Its Web site has tons of resources about play and nature, and on how to get involved. The Providence Children's Museum will continue to show *Where do the Children Play?* as new hosts volunteer. And a group of Rhode Island families have joined forces at www.rifamiliesinnature.org to organize monthly hikes and help families find out what nature and play resources are available to them.

Check them out, turn off the TV and go play. New England is a lovely place to explore, especially in summer.

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