

Go Outside and Play!

Written by Stuart Sheldon
December 2014

When did we get too scared to shoo our kids out the door?



From now on, for at least an hour after school, my kids have to play outside. I don't really care what they do, as long as they do it in the dirt, the wind, under a tree, or in a body of water. I want to see earth under their fingernails. *Outdoor Time* is the new rule.

My boys are four and six. They spend seven and a half hours at school each day. And like virtually every other city-dwelling child, they're inundated with devices, schedules, and supervision. What they need is emptiness to fill with their imaginations. The solution is simple -- open a door.

When I was in grade school, most every day, the moment we got home, we "went out to play," which meant running down the block to knock on our neighbors' doors and collect them for whatever action/mischief we could muster: hide-and-seek, tree climbing, fort building. We were unsupervised and often barefoot. And other than stubbed toes, no one was ever seriously injured.

Today most parents blanch at the notion of their kids heading out the door. Granted, my four-year-old is a bit young, but the first-grader is fully able to manage in the area around our home and even up and down our block.

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In an eye-opening article in *The Atlantic*, Hanna Rosen cites a study of “children’s independent mobility,” conducted in urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods in the U.K. It shows “that in 1971, 80 percent of third-graders walked to school alone. By 1990, that measure had dropped to 9 percent, and now it’s even lower.”

What on earth has changed in our children’s environments so much in that time? I’ll tell you what: *nothing*.

Rosen continues, “When you ask parents why they are more protective than their parents were, they might answer that the world is more dangerous than it was when they were growing up. But this isn’t true.... For example, parents now routinely tell their children never to talk to strangers, even though all available evidence suggests that children have about the same (very slim) chance of being abducted by a stranger as they did a generation ago. Maybe the real question is, how did these fears come to have such a hold over us? And what have our children lost -- and gained -- as we’ve succumbed to them?”

Our fears are stunting our kids’ emotional growth. We’re clipping their wings. So *out they go* to play...and fly.

We’re lucky to live in such a rich, natural, year-round environment. Most Upper Eastside neighborhoods enjoy lush foliage to climb, amazing bugs and lizards to chase, rich soil to dig, warm waters to splash in.

“Children are born naturalists. They explore the world with all their senses and innocence,” says the British director of the documentary *Project Wild Thing*. The filmmaker, father of a three- and five-year-old, says his quest is to “sell” the outdoors to his kids so they’ll embrace it and immerse themselves in it as he did and still does. And guess what? They love it.

We have wonderful parks: Oleta, Morningside, Belle Meade, and many more. Mind you, the goal here is not to create work for parents as chauffeurs. The goal is to simply step out the front door. That said, our parks offer vast arrays of outdoor opportunities. Do yourselves a favor and have a picnic for dinner at a park or any green space. Put a hibiscus flower behind your ear while the kids run about. And let them do their thing, without instruction. Make them find their “tools and games” in nature. Sticks and stones are the original toys. Everybody wins, especially

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you

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Few family scenes are more amazing than our beaches. Sit at the water's edge with your children after a long day. Follow their lead and help them construct the world their minds' eye sees. Get sandy and wet. Dig with your hands and build sandcastles. Draw in the sand and watch Neptune's Etch-O-Sketch erase it all. No plastic toys needed. Grab a handful of Sargassum seaweed, and shake it. Your kids will explode with excitement as you discover together the tiny brine shrimp that fall from the amber clusters.

Hit South Pointe Park when the cruise ships pass. Here you have open green space, palm trees, even a hill kids can roll down -- against the world-class backdrop of mind-blowing vessels steaming past on their way to exotic ports of call.

More than ever, our kids need that independence and unstructured playtime to imagine, inhabit, and manipulate their environments. They need open sky and no agenda. It's in these situations that kids teach themselves to explore, to discover, and to interact with one another. All that's required is their built-in enthusiasm and your willingness to let them activate it.

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