

## When Boys Will Be Bored

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor  
February 2016

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### Do we deprive our kids by offering them a better life?



’m bored,” my seven-year-old barked at me one sunny Saturday morning.

I stomped in from the kitchen and answered, “You are never to say that again. You have a room full of toys and books and a park nearby and a pool. Figure it out.”

I grew up in the southern end of Miami. Though we lived modestly, I always had a bicycle and a baseball team. I even went to sleep-away camp. Still, I felt embarrassed that we resided, literally, “on the wrong side of the tracks,” and would periodically ask my dad, *when will we join the country club?*

like many of my friends’ families across US 1.

My circumstances today are far different. My children live much higher on the hog. I know that’s the American Dream. But I struggle with it because even though my boys are healthy, silly, and kind, at times they seem oblivious to their good fortune and show a lack of appreciation for it.

Are my lovely sons stricken with a sense of entitlement?

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I often joke that my parenting mantra is “not to f\*&k my kids up too much.” While I believe my wife and I are succeeding at that dubious metric, I fear we can do better in making our boys understand that their First World comfort is solely based on their dumb luck combined with our hard work (and dumb luck). They appear to have certain expectations based on where and how we live, with soccer camp, Xbox, sushi dinners, and family trips abroad being standard operating procedure.

In a wonderful article in the *Guardian* titled “Why Depriving Your Kids of Toys Is a Great Idea” (September 1, 2015), Madeleine Somerville writes, “It’s time to rethink deprivation as a parenting strategy. Living with less, it turns out, means more. More money in our savings account, more space on our shelves, and best of all, more communication, imagination, and concentration from our kids.”

Today’s instant-gratification world didn’t exist when we were young. So how do we instill humility, self-starting, and originality? Somerville isn’t suggesting that we remove toys from our kids’ lives, but that we throttle back on providing every creature comfort available.

“My five siblings and I grew up in a cruel wasteland of deprivation that included whole-wheat cereals, secondhand clothing, and shared rooms,” she writes. “To add insult to injury, we didn’t even have a TV to distract us from our hardship.”

New neighbors, with two kids the same ages as ours, recently relocated from Europe to the house across from us. Within minutes of their arrival, both their children were on their bikes riding up and down our street. In the days that followed, we’d answer our doorbell to two toothless smiles, inviting, in charming Dutch accents, our sons out to kick a soccer ball. They even hung a rope swing in the Poinciana tree in their front yard.

My wife and I said to one another that our kids just got a normal childhood -- finally! No playdates, no schedules, no trendy toys. Just children hanging out in the front yard, making their own entertainment.

In his seminal 1982 book, *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt posited that the more society becomes high-tech, the more people demand to be high-touch. As we progress into a more automated, immediate way of living, we intuitively seek an equal measure of back-to-basics human

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connection. For kids, that means being with their pals, climbing trees, drawing, singing silly songs, building forts. *Not* being catered to by us with constant high-end diversions.

Science proves this. Somerville writes, “In a study designed to identify and prevent addictive patterns in adults, two German researchers somehow [convinced a nursery school](#) to remove all toys from the classroom for three months. Remarkably, the scenario didn’t devolve into *Lord of the Flies*

acted out in miniature. Instead, teachers reported that while on the first day the children seemed bewildered and confused, by the end of the third month they were engaged in wildly imaginative play, able to concentrate better and communicate more effectively.”

At South Pointe in January, I watched my sons dig a hole in the sand at the water’s edge, burrowing into the wet muck with bare hands. An hour passed, and while each focused intently on the widening hole and incoming tide, my heart filled with the purity of their satisfaction.

When my children display a lack of appreciation for their privilege, I’m not just mortified; I believe they’re at risk of flailing when forced to swim in the turbulent waters of adulthood. Just because we may have the means to give our kids the world, doesn’t mean it’s a good idea. When I was a boy, we did a lot more with a lot less and turned out just fine.

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