

Danville News Column
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“Come Out and Play!”
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When I wasn't doing chores, my back yard was a 100 acre wood. Me and Christopher Robin. It would be “Bye, mom,” in the morning. Sometimes we'd pack several sandwiches or roast hot dogs on sticks out in the woods. We always carried matches, magnifying glass, and knife. We climbed trees. We dammed up the creek. We floated boats down the creek. We raced sticks down the creek. We captured bumble bees in jars. We played war. We whittled. We explored. When the cow bell rang, we'd dawdle home for dinner. Nighttime meant chasing lightning bugs. Mom had no idea what we had done, no idea where we had been. So long as we were relatively uninjured – no broken bones, no excessive bleeding -- all was well with the world.

How we remained seriously uninjured or unharmed remains a mystery. Stitches, broken bones, concussions, minor fire burns do not count. In a pinch, we did look after each other.

Do kids still build forts?

We didn't need and we didn't want adults interfering with our sports or games. Who needed organized sports? We knew the rules. When the rules didn't apply, we'd figure it out and invent our own rules. The art of negotiation and compromise. Puppies learn by tussling, rolling, biting. We two-legged puppies learn the same way.

In educational worlds, this is called a matter of healthy executive function. Executive function means self-regulation, controlling your emotions, moderating your behavior, practicing patience, suspending selfishness. Teachers, from Elementary School to college, are seeing less and less of this in classrooms. Fewer kids know how to be clever, resourceful, independent, playful.

They have trouble amusing themselves.

They have trouble calming themselves down.

Then have trouble congratulating others students who do better than them.

They have trouble being good sports. We instead have trained them to depend on some adult referee telling them what's acceptable and what isn't, what the rules are.

They have trouble imagining because they watch too many movies, too many screens, too many insipid, banal cartoons. Instead of imagining how Mary Poppins looks or how Brer Rabbit laughs, we tell them, we show them, we imprison them in the opinions of the movie-makers.

You want to ruin a fantastical book like the Lord of the Rings? Turn it into a movie. Now it's no longer my image of Frodo that matters but Peter Jackson's.

When I was a kid we did not want adults interfering, telling us how or what. You only can scrounge up half a team? No problem. We supply our own pitcher. We play without a third baseman. Any ball hit into right field is an automatic out. What if your hit skies and smacks the street lamp and busts the bulb? That's a do-over. It's also means slaps on the back congratulating you.

We kids didn't want adults entering our world. Dads worked and mom's were busy at home doing whatever it is moms do. Benign neglect best describes the art of parenthood. Let's avoid messing up the natural order. If any of our parents showed up to watch one of our games, it would be terribly awkward. "Yo, Andrews, what's your mom doing on the sidelines? Why'd she bring a folding chair? You in trouble or something?" We lived in separate worlds and we both were far happier that way. There was the kid world and there was the adult world, and so long as my arteries weren't squirting blood, never the twain should meet.

Forgive me if I sound like some crotchety old geezer. It isn't as if I want them to have what I had. I simply want kids to have what they deserve: a chance to be kids.

Can't blame the kids. Not at all. We can blame us adults for training them this way, standardizing sameness, mediocrity. We boast individuality, but it's a lie. Instead of creative, open-ended play, we've over-regulated them with "screens, leagues, and lessons."

Once upon a time home life was stable and play unstructured. Now we suffer too much the reverse. Home is unstable and play way too structured.

Fact: unstructured play allows for exploration and discovery.

Fact: different areas of the brain are used and fired up by unstructured play

Fact: exercise helps pump fresh oxygen to the brain

Fact: continuous non-stop academic study, without recess, heightens aggression

Fact: when three Texas schools reduced recess to allow more classroom time, 3rd grade students performed less well academically and exhibited increased health risks.

Imagine that.

