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Let Our Children Roam Free

Fear of traffic risks and 'stranger danger' are holding our children captive indoors. For the sake of their health and development, and for the environment they will one day need to protect, we have to find ways of getting them into the wild.

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Here's an unusual request from a feature writer: I'd like you to stop reading this article right now. Take a few seconds to remember your favorite place to play as a child. Where was that special place? What did it look like? How did it smell? Don't carry on reading until you have this place clearly pictured in your mind's eye. Ready to read on? Good. Here are some predictions. Your favorite childhood place to play was out of doors. It was away from adults. And it was a 'wild' place – not truly wild perhaps, but unkempt, dirty, and quite possibly a little bit dangerous. How can I be so sure? Because over the years I've asked lots of grown-ups this question – parish clerks, senior civil servants, nursery workers, landscape architecture undergraduates, council officials, foresters, politicians, teachers – and they all say the same thing. If you doubt me, just raise the subject at your next coffee break or party and see what comes up.

Now some more memories: what did you do there, in that magical, mysterious spot? Maybe you played tag and hide-and-seek, made mud pies or built dens. You definitely hung out with your best friends, and perhaps you spent time there on your own as well. Your preferences are probably typical not just of your culture, class or generation, but of children across the world and throughout history.

It seems that, given the chance, human beings in their middle years of childhood love nothing more than a secret hideaway they can make their own: usually a spot carefully chosen to be just out of earshot of a shouting parent.

Yes, even the UK's current breed of battery reared, celebrity-fed, techno-kids would, given the chance, rather be outside meeting their mates and mucking about than stuck indoors surfing the net.

And parents too say that they want their children to be able to play out more. Yet children are disappearing from the outdoors at a rate that would make them top of any conservationist's list of endangered species if they were any other member of the animal kingdom. So does it matter that kids aren't playing outside as much these days?

Let's start with health, and specifically with childhood obesity. Here, everyone agrees: playing out keeps kids thinner. Even the Government's own recent public health white paper accepts that the loss of opportunities for spontaneous outdoor play is one of the main causes of childhood obesity. Dr William Deitz, the leading US Federal Government expert on nutrition and physical activity, claims that play may be the 'magic bullet' experts have been searching for, saying in a British Medical Journal editorial, that 'opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity.'

The physical benefits of outdoor play should come as no surprise. What's more remarkable is the growing evidence that children's mental health and emotional well-being is enhanced by contact with the outdoors, and that the restorative effect appears to be strongest in natural settings.

Studies at the University of Illinois' Human-Environment Research Laboratory on children with Attention-Hyperactivity Deficit Disorder (ADHD) have shown that green outdoor spaces not only foster creative play and improve interactions with adults; they also relieve the symptoms of the

disorder. Although research on the developmental significance of childhood engagement with nature is in its infancy, the researchers are convinced of the depth of the connection between children's well-being and the environment, claiming that contact with nature may be 'as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep'.

The great thing about many natural places is that they are ideal environments for children to explore, giving them the chance to expand their horizons and build their confidence while learning about and managing the risks for themselves. These places are unpredictable, ever changing, and prone to the randomness of nature and the vagaries of the weather. But far from being a problem, the uncertainty and variation inherent in natural settings is part of what attracts us to them in the first place. Indeed in evolutionary terms, it is the unsurpassed ability of Homo sapiens to adjust to changes in our habitat that has, for better or worse, led us to be the dominant species on the planet.

Which means that a bit of danger and uncertainty is actually good for you. Bringing it back to children's play, the Danish landscape architect Helle Nebelong – creator of some wonderful natural public spaces in Copenhagen – puts it like this:

'I am convinced that standardized play equipment is dangerous. When the distance between all the rungs on the climbing net or the ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where he puts his feet. This lesson cannot be carried over into all the knobby and asymmetrical forms with which one is confronted throughout life.'

But there's more to outdoor play than learning and health. Den-building, bug-hunting and pond dipping make visible the intensity of children's relationship with nature. These primal activities not only show how closely attuned are our senses to the workings of the natural world, but also speak to a deeper spiritual bond with landscapes and living things that leaves impoverished those who, whether by choice or compulsion, lead their lives indoors. In his recent book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our kids from nature-deficit disorder*, American journalist and parenting expert Richard Louv argues that it is the immediacy, depth and unboundedness of unstructured outdoor play that gives the nature-child encounter most meaning, and that adult-led educational activities are a poor second-best – and in the case of television or the internet, third or fourth best.

Culture of fear

Just why is the decline in children's outdoor experiences happening? The root causes of the dramatic loss of children's freedoms lie in changes to the very fabric of their lives over the last 30 years or so. An exponential growth in road traffic, alongside poor town planning and shifts in the make-up and daily rhythms of families and communities, have left children with fewer outdoor places to go and fewer friendly faces looking out for them if they needed a bit of help, a cuddle or simply a pee and a glass of water. These changes coincided with – some would say fed into – the growth of what sociologist Frank Furedi calls the 'culture of fear': a generalized anxiety about all manner of threats that found fertile ground in turn-of-the-millennium families, even though children are statistically safer from harm now than at any point in human history. In a textbook demonstration of the mechanisms of the market, these physical, economic and social changes and fears have been exploited by manufacturers and advertisers, whose products and messages both reinforce the logic of keeping children virtual prisoners, and compel us to compensate them in the only way our cash-rich, time-poor society seems to know: by spending money on them.

Successive governments must bear some of the blame for children's captivity, through their promotion of planning policies that relentlessly favor cars over communities and profit over people. But when looking for evidence of political guilt, do not pay too much attention to the much-bemoaned fate of playing fields. Ironically, they are now more protected than any other type of land use. In any case, they have always been more important to the sport-playing men who monopolize them than to children, for whom they are way down the list of most-loved outdoor spaces. Studies have shown that, given the chance, children spend more time playing in the

bushes, trees and ditches around the edges of playing fields than on the flat green monocultures that are their *raison d'être*. Again, reawaken those childhood memories. For most of us, playing fields were where we took part in the ritual humiliation known as school sport or where, if we ever had the temerity to pay a visit in our free time, belligerent adults would chase us off, determined not to let our impromptu kick-about ruin their sacred pitch. No, the real planning crimes lie elsewhere: in racetrack streets, in estates devoid of attractive parks and green spaces, and in town plans that wed families to their cars forever. There's no doubt that traffic danger, unlike stranger danger, is a real threat to children and a legitimate worry for parents. Around 100 child pedestrians are killed every year, a figure that puts the UK near the bottom of Europe's child road safety league. It's no surprise that Government figures show a steady fall in children walking or cycling over the last twenty years or more, to the extent that while over 90 per cent of kids own a bike, just two per cent cycle to school.

The upshot of these policies, which never gave children a second thought, is to trap them in their increasingly well-appointed cells, utterly dependent on the parental taxi service and make them captive consumers of whatever indoor diversions they and their parents can conjure up. Health experts have even coined a new word, *obesogenic*, to describe those aspects of our lives that make us fat, and top of the list is the design of streets, towns and cities.

Time is surely running out for those who want to reengage children with the outdoors. Official Government figures say that over 30 per cent of children aged eight to 10 never play outside without an adult watching over them. And research by Mayer Hillman and colleagues at the Policy Studies Institute suggests that, in a single generation, the 'home habitat' of a typical eight year-old – the area in which children are able to travel on their own – has shrunk to one-ninth of its former size. Actually, that was between 1971 and 1990, but do you think things have improved for children since then? Neither do I. We face the prospect of a generation of children growing up at best indifferent to, or at worst terrified of, the world outside their homes, and who will then, as adults, pass on their fear of the outdoors to their own children, as Richard Louv starkly evokes in the title of his book.

Natural play

How can this dismal future be avoided? It may be unrealistic to think that we can ever fully restore to children the free-range childhoods enjoyed by my generation. But we can take steps to loosen their cages and extend their territory. My action plan for outdoor play would start with the spaces and places children find themselves in every day: playgrounds, parks, schools and streets. If what best feeds children's bodies, minds and spirits is frequent, free-spirited, playful engagement with nature, we need to go with the grain of their play instincts and put our efforts into creating neighborhood spaces where they can get down and dirty in natural outdoor settings, free of charge and on a daily basis.

That's exactly what the authorities are doing in Freiburg, a German city with strong green credentials situated on the edge of the Black Forest. For over a decade now Freiburg's parks department has stopped installing the sterile playgrounds full of tubular steel, primary colored plastic and expensive rubber surfacing, and instead has been creating 'nature playgrounds' that are a bit more, well, earthy. The resulting landscapes are diverse spaces with mounds, ditches, logs, fallen trees, boulders, bushes, wild flowers and dirt. Full of secret corners and shady spots, they are just like the wild spaces of our childhood memories. Yet they meet the same Europe-wide safety standards as UK playgrounds. As Freiburg's existing public play areas wear out, the parks department works with local children and adults to create these new-style nature playgrounds. Over 40 have been built so far, and they are designed with a lifetime in mind. Trees, bushes and flowering plants are carefully chosen to create playful nooks and crannies, to attract insects and birds, and to mature and spread, adding mystery and richness to the site as the years go by.

The construction methods of Freiburg's nature play areas are a model of sustainability compared to the raw materials, heavy industrial processes and carbon emissions that go into building conventional playgrounds. And if the aesthetic and environmental arguments are not enough to win

you over, perhaps the price tag will. Freiburg's nature play spaces are typically half the capital cost of a conventional fixed equipment play area of the same size, simply due to the high costs of tubular steel, colored plastic and unnecessary hi-tech rubber surfacing. The approach was introduced after research by the city's university showed that simply having good green space near children's homes encouraged them out of doors and away from the TV. The playgrounds have attracted international interest. Not surprisingly, children love them too.

The UK is light-years behind Freiburg and Copenhagen – and for that matter much of Northern Europe. But even here, what might be called a 'movement for real play' is beginning to spread. In Newcastle, local residents involved in improving Exhibition Park organized a 'den day' to introduce children to the joys of shelter building. Asked what they thought about the day, one boy said: 'I love this, getting really filthy dirty!' while a girl responded: 'If I could rewind back to this day every day I would. This is a mint day!' In Scotland, Stirling Council has been inspired by Helle Nebelong to create natural play spaces across the authority. While one site was still being built, children started wrestling in the mud created by the construction works, and their mums persuaded the council to keep the muddy areas for good.

In the South West of England 'Wild About Play', an environmental play project, is supporting hundreds of playworkers and environmental educators by sharing playful ideas for outdoor activities. Children have told the project that what they most want to do in the great outdoors is to make fires and cook on them, and to collect and eat wild foods. Another environmental project, Greenstart, aims to show the benefits of contact with green spaces for younger children through running activity programs in local outdoor spaces in Northumberland. One five-year-old boy involved in a family tree planting event said: 'I can't wait to go back and see my tree.' In Cambridge, Bath and Haringey, that near-extinct species the park keeper is appearing in a new guise. Called 'play rangers' they are specially trained and run playful activities at set times, helping to build up usage, familiarity and ultimately ownership of these spaces. Forest schools – where teachers regularly spend whole days in the woods with their classes – are starting up in many woodland areas, supported nationally by an alliance of conservation charities, the Timber Trade Federation and the Forestry Commission. The charity Learning through Landscapes is helping schools across the country create some fine natural playgrounds.

Not content with just forest schools and traditional playgrounds, the Forestry Commission in England has been working with me to look at other ways we can attract and engage children and young people in woodlands. We recently visited Freiburg's nature playgrounds and were inspired by what we saw. Realizing that adventure is an essential feature of any woodland visit, we have started thinking about ways to give children – and their parents – the confidence to enjoy more intimate, unregulated contact with the wildlife and landscapes of the woods. At some sites, we are looking at literally pulling down the fences between the play areas and the forest beyond. At others, we want to give children the message that they are not just allowed to build dens and dam streams; they are positively encouraged to do so. If you think this sounds reckless, remember: children are better at managing the risks in natural settings than we give them credit for. After all on a beach, the sea is anything but safe, but have you ever seen a fence between you and the shoreline?

Exciting outdoor environments are all very well, but children have to be able to get to them. Of course, streets are the starting point for so many children's independent outdoor adventures, and with traffic rising every year, the prospects for reclaiming them may look bleak. But green shoots of hope are springing up amidst the gloom.

Contrary to what car-loving journalists might say, many communities are crying out for safer streets with lower speed limits and less traffic. A growing alliance of environmental, road safety and children's agencies has signed up to '20's plenty', the call for a standard speed limit of 20 mph in residential areas. Some communities have gone even further and worked with local councils to create 'home zones': people-friendly streets based on continental designs, where the street space is transformed from a car corridor to a shared social space in which people can meet, children can play and the car driver is a guest. Having been part of the original campaign to introduce home

zones to the UK a decade ago, I recently surveyed some 40 schemes to find out their impact. Over half reported more children walking, cycling and playing in the street. Intriguingly, some schemes have also seen falling crime rates and rising levels of community activity in the form of litter collections, festivals and street parties.

Parental guidance

We parents also have the power to resist the seductions of consumerism and play our part in restoring to children some of the freedoms we took for granted when we were young. We can say no a little more, switch off the screens and direct our children's curious eyes to some altogether more expansive vistas. In doing so, we need to face up to our fears and chip away at the free-floating anxiety that can so easily beset us. Some threats – traffic, for instance – are real, and can ultimately only be tackled by governments in response to political pressure. But others need to be seen for what they are: a social neurosis stemming from a collective loss of nerve.

For instance, in the UK we have become completely paranoid about the threat to children from strangers. Less than one child in a million is killed by a stranger each year. The numbers have if anything declined since the Second World War. Over ten times as many children are killed by cars, and around five times as many by their own parents or relatives. Yet on the mercifully rare occasions when the worst does happen, the headline that greets us is 'no child is safe'. As a parent, I believe it's about time we rose up en masse and showed this fear for what it is: scare mongering. The media has to shoulder much of the blame. Their hyper-emotive stories appear cruelly crafted to scare us witless, undermining any attempt by readers and viewers to balance a reasonable interest in human tragedy with a realistic assessment of the risks. The real tragedy is that parents' anxieties and restrictions feed the very fear of the outdoors that gets so readily translated into 'stranger danger'.

Criminologists have long known that in streets, parks and playgrounds there is safety in numbers. Turn that around and you get deserted streets, underused parks and empty playgrounds leading to a vicious circle of fear, vandalism, misuse and decay. So I say to every parent, wake up and smell the fresh air: take your child to your local park and help save the planet. Better still, why not arrange some outdoor play dates with fellow parents?

You'll help spread that outdoor vibe, your child will have twice the fun and who knows, you might even enjoy yourself.

You may think that risk aversion; together with its legal offspring the compensation culture, is everywhere. Barely a week goes by without the media reporting some or other nonsensical health and safety diktat allegedly handed down from on high. Conkers, pet corners, egg boxes, even daisy chains have been deemed a danger too far for our children.

My response once again is: use your common sense and don't believe the hype. The safety Nazis and the compensation culture are, if not quite myths, then certainly paper tigers. Here's a quote: 'An essential part of the process of a child becoming an adult is the need, and desire, to explore limits and to try new experiences.' Read that quote again and think about it. Its source may surprise you. It is not from the youth wing of the Dangerous Sports Club. It is from CEN, Europe's leading safety standards agency. As a statement about what children deserve, you could not wish for anything clearer. What would most help parents cure themselves of risk anxiety is more of these reassuring, supportive messages: more voices that say: 'You can be a good parent and still give your children a taste of freedom.'

Turning to the courts, the reality is that they are no more likely today to hand down daft judgments' than they were 10, 20 or a hundred years ago. To take just one example, a recent ruling actually forced the Corporation of London to allow swimmers access to Highgate Ponds even when lifeguards are not present. Janet Paraskeva, chief executive of the Law Society, says: 'In recent year's accident claims, far from rising, have remained static and then fell last year by 9.5

per cent.' Again, it is down to each of us to challenge the myth of the compensation culture and to restore some balance.

Too many children spend far too much time stuck in front of screens, not so much couch potatoes as couch prisoners. Too many of the streets where children live have become the sole domain of the car. For too long children's outdoor play has been overly haunted by the specter of the predatory pedophile and the health and safety zealot. Too many parents forget their own childhoods and switch off their common sense, excessively influenced by sensationalist media coverage on the one hand and seductive advertising on the other.

It is also likely that 'battery-reared' children will lack confidence as they grow up and be more vulnerable to bullying. Researchers have found a link between children who become victims of bullying and the protectiveness of their parents. And in 1999 the report Bright Futures: Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health from the Mental Health Foundation warned of the dangers of overprotecting children and stopping them from developing their own coping mechanisms. All this is a disaster for anyone who wants to bring freedom, adventure and nature back into the daily rhythms of children's lives. Surely it's about time we all recognized the value of allowing children to truly get to grips with the knobbly and asymmetrical forms of the natural world. Just as we all did when we were young.

WE NEED A CAMPAIGN

To stand a chance of restoring the outdoors as childhood's rightful domain, a movement for real play needs to do more than just create projects on the ground, however inspiring these may be. We need a high-profile campaign with clear objectives, powerful advocates and at its heart a vision of children once again claiming their rightful place out of doors and immersing themselves in nature.

We need:

- A national program to upgrade the thousands of parks and public play areas that many councils will otherwise leave to rust and rot.
- Housing developers to be required by law to create attractive, playful green spaces within easy reach of every child and family, and to ensure that streets are designed as home zones.
- Politicians to get the message that a speed limit of '20' really is 'plenty' in streets where children live.
- To tell Government that it's not acceptable to build schools with postage stamp-sized playgrounds devoid of greenery, or to warehouse children in nurseries with no outdoor space.
- To involve children themselves in creating and maintaining play spaces, so that their views can be taken into account and they feel ownership of the results.

All this may sound ambitious, but public campaigns can still make a difference. No one in Government gave school meals a second thought until Jamie Oliver switched on his food processor and showed us the truth about the 'food' we were offering the nation's children. Imagine the waves that J K Rowling, say, would make if she declared that, when it comes to stretching a child's spirit, the nation's playgrounds offer a diet of adventure unworthy of any aspiring Harry Potter. Picture the impact that David Attenborough would have if he argued that children out of doors are just as good an indicator of the quality of their habitats as wild salmon are of theirs, and deserved just as much protection.

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<http://www.rethinkingchildhood.com/>

OUTDOOR PLAY CONTACT LIST

Fair Play for Children: www.arunet.co.uk/fairplay

Federation of city farms and community gardens: <http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/>

Forest Education Initiative: www.foresteducation.org/forest_schools.php

Free Play Network: <http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/>

Green space: <http://www.green-space.org.uk/>

Haringey play rangers: <http://www.haringey-play.org.uk/>

Helle Nebelong: <http://www.sansehaver.dk/>

Learning through Landscapes: <http://www.ltl.org.uk/>

Natural Learning Initiative: www.naturalearning.org/index.html

Playlink: <http://www.playlink.org.uk/>

Transport 2000 speed campaigning: <http://www.transport2000.org.uk/>

Wild About Play: <http://www.playwork.co.uk/wildaboutplay>

Woodland Trust: <http://www.wildaboutwoods.org.uk/>

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