



Learn How Outdoor 'Free Play' Helps Scouts Grow

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When a child is abducted from any street corner in America, the story understandably leads the evening news and earns a “breaking news” banner on CNN.com. So what happens when millions of children disappear from America’s backyards and playgrounds? Nobody notices.

Well, almost nobody.

In recent years, child development experts have begun sounding the alarm about the decline in free outdoor play. David Elkind, Ph.D., author of *The Power of Play*, says that children have lost eight hours a week of unstructured play and outdoor activities in the last two decades, even as the time they spend in organized sports has doubled. In a 2011 issue of the *American Journal of Play* dedicated to free play, Peter Gray, Ph.D., a research professor in psychology at Boston College, reported that 85 percent of American moms said their preteen children played outdoors less than they themselves did a generation ago.

“Stranger danger” is the leading reason that kids are enjoying less free play, but it’s only one factor. Many schools are cutting back on recess to make more time for academics and test preparation. Many parents are enrolling their kids in sports and other activities that help them build winning résumés at ever earlier ages. And many camps are offering “prep” programs that replace swimming and horseback riding with classes in computers and public speaking.

Perhaps the biggest problem, however, is that too few achievement-focused adults realize just how much kids are achieving when they’re playing. “Play is a way of learning,” Elkind said in an interview. “Through their play, children create new learning experiences that they couldn’t have in other ways.”

What Free Play Teaches

One of the key things kids learn in free play is how to deal with one another. In a simple game like hide and seek, for example, they have to decide what the boundaries are, where home base is, and who's going to be "it" first. If the child who's "it" opens his eyes before he has counted down to zero, the group has to negotiate an appropriate resolution. Along the way, Elkind said, "children learn mutual respect, the ability to take the perspective of the other, to follow the rules that your peer makes so he'll follow the rules that you make."

But kids learn more quantifiable skills as well, according to Gray. Much of his research involves studying play in hunter-gatherer societies, where children—even well into their teens—spend most of their time playing. "They're playing at the skills that are important to the culture, not because anybody is telling them to but just because it's very natural to play at the things that they see adults doing," he said in an interview. "They're playing at hunting and they're playing at digging up roots and they're playing at the various dances of the culture."

In a literate culture like ours, free play often involves words (such as hopscotch rhymes) and numbers (such as scorekeeping). "When children are learning these things in play, they learning them in a context that's meaningful to them, that makes sense to them," he said.

Finally, kids at play learn skills that neither they nor adults can necessarily identify. Elkind related a story told by Maria Montessori, the famous Italian educator. Montessori once encountered a young girl who was so intent on sorting and stacking a set of graded cylinders that she totally ignored other children who were singing and marching around her. Finally, the girl stopped and gave a beatific smile. "Montessori said, 'We don't know what she learned, but she learned a great deal,'" Elkind recalled. "That's the point. We as adults may not know what children are learning when they're engaging in these repetitive activities, but for the child, it's a learning experience."

Free Play in Scouting

Of course, Scouting at all levels offers plenty of opportunity for free play: Cub Scouts exploring a creek during a family campout, Boy Scouts performing silly skits at a campfire, Venturers playing a pickup game of Hacky Sack during a backpacking trek. What's more, the program brings together kids of various ages and offers a safe environment (no "stranger danger") for free play.

The trick is for Scout leaders to take a step back and refrain from turning every game into a teachable moment or filling every idle hour with belt-loop or merit badge instruction. Otherwise, Scouting becomes yet another stress-inducing, achievement-oriented activity.

In his research, Gray has found a causal relationship between the decline in free play and an alarming rise in anxiety, depression, and narcissism among kids. "Kids are

spending so much time in our culture on achievement-oriented things that we're quite literally driving some kids crazy," he said.

Scouting offers a unique opportunity to restore some sanity to childhood. All we have to do is remember the words of Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell. In *The Wolf Cub's Handbook*, he wrote, "Play is the first great educator."