



## Play Time

I read an interesting story on a blog the other day about some interesting research that had been done in England. The researchers had done a number of interviews with families, asking questions related to children's play patterns. They had attempted to gather enough data to make comparisons between children now and children of previous generations, going back to the great-grandparents. Specifically, they were interested in the amount of freedom that children were given, for example in how far they were allowed to roam unsupervised.

The overall pattern that they found won't be a surprise to anyone - children these days are very much constrained in where they are allowed to go by themselves - but it was enlightening to see just how much freedom children of past generations did have. In one example given, the great-grandfather roamed freely up to around 6 miles away to go fishing, his son had only a fraction of that distance, and by the time we get down to the current child in the family, he is not allowed to go past the end of his block.

The takeaway point from the data can be summed up in one quote from the article, "Unstructured time outdoors is becoming a thing of the past."

Modern parents of course have (what they think is) a very good reason for circumscribing their children's freedom - they see the outside world as a dangerous place; not only might their children hurt themselves while playing without structure and organization, but they might be attacked or kidnapped ... or something.

I have no real data on these things, so I can't make a particularly solid statement one way or the other, but I think that a rational analysis would show that children (in any generation) are far more likely to be harmed by people known to the family than by the mythical kidnapper (I am of course speaking of typical first world societies), and I think it could be argued that they are statistically safer during such unstructured time outdoors.

I am naturally heavily influenced in my thinking on these matters by my own experiences. When my brother and I were around 7~9 or so, we were given a 'zone' in which we could roam, consisting of the area bounded by some major roads. But once we were a bit older than that, the borders of the zone dissolved, and we would head off on our bicycles, pretty much considering the entire city (and nearby countryside) to be our territory. In other words, we could go as far as we wanted as long as we were able to get back for dinner. Perhaps my mother lectured us on "Don't talk to strangers!" or perhaps not; I have no particular memory of any such concerns.

And I can verify how important that freedom was to us by simply calling up any number of remembered episodes from those days. Anything that sticks in memory for 50 years has definitely made an impression! (Close your eyes at this point Mom, and come back after the next paragraph!)

We enjoyed cycling over to a huge undeveloped area a few miles from our home, and the easiest way to get there was to 'ride' our bikes across a wide river over a 'no pedestrians allowed' railroad bridge. There were no walkways on it, and if we heard the whistle of an oncoming train while we were part-way across, well, that just added an extra frisson to the proceedings! And we frequently came home with pennies that we had

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flattened by taping them on the tracks in advance of the train's approach. A penny that has been run over by a hundred-car grain train is one very flat penny, I can tell you!

I won't bore you with a million more episodes. I have written here in A Story A Week (just recently) about enjoying time just fooling around in the little river behind my house, and now that I think about it, I guess that is really just a continuation of the same behaviour. I don't have time to wander very far these days, but I still enjoy turning over the rocks to see what's underneath ...

'Unstructured time outdoors.' If it weren't a bit of a paradox to suggest it, if I were 'president', I would legislate this as compulsory for every kid ...

... of any age!

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