

How We Took the Child Out of Childhood

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DANNY BERNSTEIN and Robin Winter don't know each other. They both live in pricey Westchester suburbs (he's in Scarsdale, she's in Chappaqua), but their concerns aren't necessarily similar.

He is passionate about youth sports and has just started a company, Backyard Sports, that's dedicated to making the games kids play just fun for kids, rather than an achievement arms race for parents. She would just like to make it easier for her seventh grader to ride his bicycle to school, something almost no suburban child gets to do anymore. But she can't seem to get anyone in a position of influence in her town interested in even trying to tap a new government program that provides money to make it safer for children to go to school on their own.

We'll pass over the slightly incongruous premise in both cases. Kids need parents to organize sports events in a way that will let kids be kids? And it takes a government program for kids to be able to safely ride bicycles or walk to school on their own? (The answers are maybe and probably.)

But both Mr. Bernstein and Ms. Winter, in their own ways, are on to one of the great mysteries of suburban life in America. How did we get to the point where few kids ever get to play with friends outside of a play date, to walk to a neighbor's house without parental escort or to have free, unsupervised time in which they're not tethered to a television set, computer or Xbox? How is it that Mr. Bernstein's friends in their 40's go out to play soccer every Saturday but their children wouldn't know how to organize a game on their own without parents around?

How come long, long ago I got to play football in the street every day after school with Sammy Brett and Howie Kavalier and the rest of the neighborhood kids on Long Island, or to ride my bike as far out along the service road of the Long Island Expressway as I cared to, but children now live in permanent lockdown, their every moment planned, organized, monitored and measured? How did this happen?

One person who thinks he knows is Steven Mintz, a history professor at the University of Houston and the author of "Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood," who has watched as a new model of childhood - one of a long succession of new models, it must be added - has taken hold over the past three decades or so.

He starts with three big changes.

First is an explosion in parental anxiety over child abductions, sexual abuse and crime, a panic almost entirely due to saturation news media coverage and not, he says, to any glaring increase in whatever dangers lurk beyond your crabgrass. Once, the child abduction in California was a local story in California. Now, it's constant fodder for national cable news stations.

Second is the parental panic over the transmission of class status, in which grades, achievement and, of course, getting into the right college (never too early to start worrying!) are seen as part of a Darwinian struggle for economic success and social esteem. So Kumon math, si, foraging for frogs, no.

Third is guilt. Parents, often two parents, are working so hard and such long hours that they figure they owe their kids a designer childhood every bit as up-to-date as that plasma TV in the living room. And since their model of life is being busy all the time, no sense having the kids just hanging out doing nothing.

Worry, competition, guilt - what a combination. "We're all Jewish mothers now, but my mother was never as invested in the way I am with my kids," Dr. Mintz said.

You can go on from there. There's technology, which has made being alone in your room the most interesting place in the universe, just as long as the computer is on. There's the living large syndrome, in which ever bigger houses mean less proximity to neighbors. And with smaller families, chances are there aren't many kids down the road anyway. Throw in, for good measure, fear of being sued over almost anything.

As Dr. Mintz notes in his book, our notion of childhood changes all the time, and often it's been a pretty grim one - in the Puritan era, children as imperfect adults in need of moral uplift; or for much of the 19th century, children as fodder for sweatshops and mines.

That said, who could have imagined that today's suburbs, with children their prime reason for being, would end up excising the one thing kids always had before: a sense of freedom, room to explore, time to wander around to see what you could find? Who could have imagined today's fortresslike homes and grand green lawns as quiet as an empty church?

This can't really be what we had in mind. Which brings us back to Mr. Bernstein and Ms. Winter, who in their small ways seem to be looking for ways to tip things back a bit, in getting parents to back off from their kids' games, in finding a way to give children the freedom to be children. Maybe good ideas, maybe bad ones. But surely there's a way out of this. If you have thoughts, please pass them along.

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