

The Anti-Helicopter Parent's Plea: Let Kids Play!

Editor's Pick. Written by Melanie Thornstrom.

It was a Friday afternoon at Mike Lanza's house in Menlo Park, Calif., and the boys were going crazy. There were boys playing ball in the street, while in the backyard, boys were skittering along the top of the fence while others were wrestling on the trampoline. The house itself is nothing special — a boxy contemporary, haphazardly furnished — but even by the elevated standards of Silicon Valley, the Lanzas' play space is extraordinary. It boasts a map of the neighborhood painted on the driveway, a fabulous 24-foot-long play river — an installation art piece, designed for children's museums — and a two-story log-cabin playhouse with a sleeping loft, whiteboard walls inside for coloring and really good speakers, blasting Talking Heads.

Leo Lanza, who was 5 at the time, was taunting my kids, claiming they were too scared to climb 12 feet to the playhouse roof, using the toe holds, and then leap onto the trampoline, which has no surrounding netting. My daughter, Violet, the only girl there, continued to decorate the playhouse walls with a purple marker. "I don't care if you get hurt," she responded airily. Her twin brother, Kieran, scrunched up his round face, turning pink. "That's not true!" he wailed. "I am not scared."

My kids were in a prekindergarten program with Leo, the youngest of the three Lanza boys. I had heard a lot about Mike's house, a few miles from our own, but that Friday-afternoon pizza party, a year and a half ago, was the first time I had gone there.

Through the glass doors of the kitchen, I could see Mike opening a bottle of wine for some guests. Mike is a well-known, if polarizing, figure in our community. An entrepreneur in his early 50s, he has a boyish grin, large hazel eyes and curly salt-and-pepper hair, and wears jeans and sneakers, like all the other middle-aged tech guys. After acquiring three Stanford degrees (a B.A., an M.B.A. and a master's in education) and selling a handful of modestly successful start-ups, Mike decided to focus on his ideas about parenting. He began writing a blog and giving talks and eventually self-published a book entitled "Playborhood," a phrase he coined to describe the environment he wanted for his kids. (He kept a hand in the tech world as well — an app he created, a map-based photo-sharing service called Streetography, is being released next week.)

Mike is a deep believer in the idea that "kids have to find their own balance of power." He wants his boys to create their own society governed by its own rules. He consciously transformed his family's house into a kid hangout, spreading the word that local children were welcome to play in the yard anytime, even when the family wasn't home. Discontented with the expensive, highly structured summer camps typical of the area, Mike

started one of his own: Camp Yale, named after his street, where the kids make their own games and get to roam the neighborhood.

Read the full thing at [NYTimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).