

We Have Almost Destroyed Childhood

Editor's Pick. Written by Lenore Skenazy.

In this sweeping article about the importance of free, non-adult-lead play — the kind of playing most of us remember doing, like, all the time as kids — psychologist Peter Gray does not mince words. The Boston College psychology professor and author of *Free to Learn* (as well as the author of one of the most popular psychology textbooks used at Harvard and elsewhere) writes:

*The famous developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1932) noted long ago **that children develop a more sophisticated and useful understanding of rules when they play with other children than when they play with adults. With adults, they get the impression that rules are fixed, that they come down from some high authority and cannot be changed. But when children play with other children, because of the more equal nature of the relationship, they feel free to challenge one another's ideas about the rules, which often leads to negotiation** and change in rules. They learn in this way that rules are not fixed by heaven, but are human contrivances to make life more fun and fair. **This is an important lesson; it is a cornerstone of democracy.***

Gray adds this, about learning to get along with others (rather than feeling helpless, attacked, “unsafe,” etc.):

*Perhaps the most important function of the culture of childhood is to teach children how to get along with peers. Children practice that constantly in social play. **To play with another person, you must pay attention to the other person's needs, not just your own, or the other person will quit. You must overcome narcissism.** You must learn to share. You must learn to negotiate in ways that respect the other person's ideas, not just yours. You must learn how*

to assert your needs and desires while at the same time understanding and trying to meet the needs and desires of your playmate. **This may be the most important of all skills that human beings must learn for a successful life.** Without this ability it is not possible to have a happy marriage, true friends, or cooperative work partners.

And finally:

*By increasing the amount of time spent in school, expanding homework, harping constantly on the importance of scoring high on school tests, banning children from public spaces unless accompanied by an adult, and replacing free play with adult-led sports and lessons, **we have created a world in which children are almost always in the presence of a supervisor, who is ready to intervene, protect, and prevent them from practicing courage, independence, and all the rest that children practice best with peers, away from adults.** I have argued elsewhere (Gray, 2011, and here) that **this is why we see record levels of anxiety, depression, suicide, and feelings of powerlessness among adolescents and young adults today.***

To me it boils down to this: A lack of unsupervised free time is a mental and physical HEALTH CRISIS — and also a potential democratic crisis. If kids never learn that they are safe when they're unsupervised, they will always expect and even demand supervision. With that, they're abdicating their own role in shaping their lives and society, and trusting authority to tell them what to do, how to act, what to believe.

Not that I think we are headed for the Dark Ages. But if we want a society where kids grow up feeling confident and competent, we have to let them experience that, which often comes after experiencing something else: Frustration, fear, the tense misery of getting themselves home when it's dark and their bike chain broke.

These are the childhood challenges (and, in the end, triumphs!) we are protecting our kids from. These may be the things they need most.

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