

Raising Children to be Adventurousome - a Few Baby Steps toward Freedom and Exploration

by Nat Shed

Many years ago during trip to the Netherlands to visit a fellow camp counselor, I learned an important perspective on life. After a night of looking at hundreds of photos of campers, Frank and I headed out for a day of sightseeing. After a visit to the statue of the boy with his finger in the dyke, we went to visit a working windmill. As we climbed up the internal stairs to top of the windmill, I noticed that all the wooden gears were exposed so anyone could put their hand into the turning gears. I said to Frank back home these gears would be covered in Plexiglas. I asked Frank why the difference in safety precautions between our two countries. He said, "It's because you Americans are so stupid; of course you don't put your hand into moving gears".

Having read *The Atlantic* magazine (April 2014) article entitled "[The Over-Protected Kid](http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/)"¹, I have started to reflect on my two favorite places to play as a child: the Wild Woods (an acre or two of undeveloped land in the center of a block of suburban homes) and Stony Bottom Creek in the farmland west of our town. This creek had a waterfall, small pool for swimming and best of all it had a real clay pit. What made both of these places so special to me, my sibling, and cousins was that they were a little unsafe and that we were able to play outside without parents watching over us. What some parents consider a somewhat dangerous situation, most kids would consider a challenge that is a little exciting. *The Atlantic* magazine article pointed out that abductions, injuries, and sexual crimes against children have not increased or decreased much over the last thirty years. It goes on to suggest that it is very important for children between second and third grade to start having some time to explore the outdoors without their parents.

I would like to suggest that parents not jump into the laissez-faire parenting of my youth, but to consider taking a few small steps in letting your child or children explore more of the outside world on their own. Please don't assume that your children are the stupid Americans that my friend Frank mentioned. I think that you will find out that your child, and youth in general, will make many more good judgments and will tend to pick the safer path when they are on their own.

But if they do misjudge a situation, they now have a special opportunity to learn from their mistakes. The wet sneaker, the cut hand, and the

bruised knee are all very good object lessons that are better learned privately than from the wise advice or the sharp disapproving voice of a parent.

These are just a few ideas to get you thinking about the importance of risk-taking and discovery in your child's life. Of course, these ideas will need to be adjusted to your neighborhood and to your family situation. Youth who live on an island off the coast of Maine will have a much different level of freedom than youth living in New Haven, Connecticut. Please use this list or make your own list of ways to increase the amount of freedom for your elementary- or middle-school age child.

- If you walk, go for a walk in woods or in a city and let your kids run ahead on the path to the next trail sign or to the next street crossing.
- If you can, let your child walk or bike to and from school and recreational activities. At first, it is a good idea to walk or bike with your child to a new destination.
- When they are younger, practice watching them from afar.
- Send your child or children to an overnight camp in Maine.
- As they get older, send them to an outdoor adventure camp or program.
- Build a tree house and put up a rope swing.
- Let them build forts and houses out of stuff.
- If you can, give them lots of siblings / cousins / aunts / uncles / friends to play with.
- When swimming, try to let them set the level of water depth that they are comfortable with.
- Let them climb trees.
- Teach them how to build fires.
- Leave a lot of cardboard and duct tape in your yard or in your basement and see what happens.

In closing, if they do get hurt on an adventure, let them cry until the tears stop, apply any needed first aid, try not to judge the actions that led up to injury, and then tell them that it will be interesting for them to watch the cut or bruise heal during the next few days. As I look back over the decades, I cannot think of any important learning or bits of wisdom that I have gained that did not come from some risk taking and with some amount of pain.

— Nat Shed

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/>