



Pixelated bliss?

The concerns of parents are preventing children of today from expressing creativity and gaining independence.

PICTURE A TYPICAL SPRING DAY IN ADELAIDE. A lawnmower buzzes in the distance, voices drift along the street. Across the road near the creek you see some young kids, not even 10, their bikes dumped in the long grass. There are no adults in sight. Occasionally you spot them moving: climbing trees, hauling around old crates and logs. After a while two more children ride up and head into the trees, small bags in hand. Still no adults...

These days such a sight would be unusual. It may even raise concern, especially if you're under 40. "Where are their parents?", and "what are they doing?" are the sorts of questions muttered. However 40 years ago it was people like me and my friends who were doing something that is rarely seen these days. It's called having fun – wild play like this used to be the norm.

During the post-war years, prosperity increased. Kids were growing up in a world of wonder; there were stories of space flight and adventure as the last vestiges of our planet were discovered. We watched these events occasionally on black and white TV. But before game consoles, computers, smart phones, or even normal phones, kids had to go out to meet their friends after school. Homework was nothing like the burden it is today.

In the days before two car families, there was every likelihood dad used the car for going to work, and kids had to get around by themselves. The ultimate present was your first bike. When it got punctures you had to learn how to repair them. It enabled and empowered an independence that represented the times.

With this bike you could visit whichever friends you wanted. Mum only knew roughly where you were and that you'd be home before dark. They didn't decide. You did. There might be warnings about not playing with so-and-so but there was an independence and trust we rarely see these days.

Now, children generally get little say. Most of the after-school activities are driven by parents aiming to fit a social mould and community expectations. Children are ferried to dancing, music, sporting, cultural and a range of other adult-organised activities. Recent US research shows all types of free play have decreased, and there is no reason to think Australia is any different. Many adults may see this control as a good thing, however research over the past three decades has shown that it isn't. What we are denying children is the ability to develop independence, self-reliance, co-operation and interpersonal skills. When our children lose the ability for imaginative play, they are unlikely to regain it as their lives become ever more structured and constrained.

The best place for children to develop these skills is spontaneous play, in an unstructured or wild environment. It allows children to interact with nature; to develop and build their own spaces and modify this environment. Looking around suburbs today, what we see is adult-designed playgrounds with fixed equipment. These do not encourage true creative or imaginative play. It's actually closer to a prison yard.

How did we come to find ourselves in this world? Researchers surveyed and interviewed parents and children, and found an adult perception of fear and risk when children are away from home. Two main perceived risks are that of strangers, and increased traffic. However crime rates are falling across all categories over the past few decades and research shows children are at much greater risk from people they know in a home environment than strangers out in the "wild". Roads are now safer with better markings, crossing points, lower speed limits and increased safety features.

However when the media – both corporate and social – reinforces these fears with dramatic stories and emphasis on the risks rather than the benefits, any drive to maintain open free play spaces is soon buried. Much better that children experience virtual worlds and have "adventures" on a screen while slowly contributing to childhood obesity problems, than parents having to worry about the latest imaginary child serial killer plucking their kids from a deserted and overgrown lot? The kids don't even know what they are missing. Ignorance can be a pixelated bliss.

What recent Canadian research shows kids are not missing is Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and a range of psychological disorders such as depression, stress and attention issues. And to top it all off, a lack of creativity. At a time when the future work environment is computerised, automated and increasingly unknown, the last thing society needs is a generation of uncreative, passive, poorly socialised and dependant youth with no experience or appreciation of nature. We – and that includes our struggling health systems – don't need any more people with chronic health issues, physical or mental.

This essay is unlikely to be read by children. They are a powerless group within our adult-controlled society. This is being read by people who can make a difference. We can change our behaviour; we can accept the world out of our eyesight is not dangerous. We can encourage councils to leave wild spaces, not to pacify and tame every creek and patch of bush or scrub. To accept that deserted lots offer places for kids to play; that piles of logs, old cable drums, planks and pipes allow kids to claim part of our world for themselves.

The sight of young children travelling to school by themselves or cycling to play after school should make us proud that the next generation will be independent and resourceful. It is time to allow our children to claim back their place in society, to give them the time and spaces to play. To discover who they are, and not who we want them to be.

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FEEDBACK

Do you agree
with Nigel?

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