

Where Have All the Children Gone?

It's summer vacation, but you might not know it from the absence of children on streets and sidewalks, in parks and public spaces. Just as afternoons and weekends during the school year are more void of children than ever before, so too is summertime.

Where are all of these young ones? Increasingly, they are contained in structured, adult-led, often indoor activities where they are told what to do, what to think, and how to act. Those play-filled afternoons with the neighborhood kids we remember from childhood? Gone. Those long summer days outside with friends, roaming in woods or water? A quaint memory. Today, for many children, nearly every waking hour of their day is orchestrated by someone else.

Free, unstructured, unsupervised childhood play in our public spaces is an artifact of a by-gone era. As Jay Griffiths writes in her eloquent book, [A Country Called Childhood](#): "How has childhood become so unnatural? Why does the dominant culture treat young humans in ways which would be illegal if applied to young dogs? Born to burrow and nest in nature, children are now exiled from it. They are enclosed indoors, caged and shut out of the green and vivid world, in ways unthinkable a generation ago."

Quiet neighborhoods aren't the only consequence of this trend away from natural childhood play. Mounting evidence reveals a rise in childhood mental health issues as children's play declines.

In his 2011 [article](#) for the *American Journal of Play*, Boston College psychology professor, Dr. Peter Gray, argues for a causal link between the systematic decline in play and the

corresponding rise in childhood anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, narcissism, and other mental illness indicators.

Gray writes: “Today, in many neighborhoods, it is hard to find groups of children outdoors at all, and, if you do find them, they are likely to be wearing uniforms and following the directions of coaches while their parents dutifully watch and cheer.”

Other researchers have found similar disturbing trends regarding play-deprivation. In her book, [*Balanced and Barefoot*](#), pediatric occupational therapist, Angela Hanscom, describes the importance of free play and its healthy impact on emotional development.

She [writes](#) about children growing up today: “We are keeping them from attaining the very sensory input they need in order to grow into resilient and able-bodied people. They need to climb, jump, run through the woods, pick up sticks, jump in mud puddles, and fall and get hurt on occasion. These are all natural and necessary experiences that will help develop a healthy sensory system—foundational to learning and accomplishing many of life’s goals.”

We need to reclaim an unenclosed, play-filled childhood for our children. We need to welcome them back into our public spaces—into our neighborhoods and parks and sidewalks—and grant children the freedom to grow outside of fences, both physical and metaphorical. We need to replace the silence with the familiar sounds of childhood—for their sake and for ours.

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