

Free the Children

Written by Charles Eisenstein

Tuesday, 01 September 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 15 September 2017 08:17

I've been seeing a lot of news articles recently about parents being arrested and their children removed from their custody because they let them play unsupervised outdoors. The first thing I felt upon reading these stories was intense indignation, followed by alienation from a society in which such a thing is remotely conceivable.

Why is this happening? Why has there been this tremendous change from my own childhood, in which it was normal for us to wander far and wide, unsupervised, as young as 6 or 7? There are a few reasons. First, the decline of community. During my childhood, all the neighbors knew each other and would keep an eye on each other's kids. The boundary between home and not-home was more fluid, more gradual. The neighbor's yard or the cornfield at the end of the street was still home territory.

WELLNESS LIFESTYLE



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Related to that, when people are tied together in a community they are not so prone to call upon remote authorities such as Child Protective Services or the police. They go to each other first, using informal means of negotiating social disputes, enforcing norms, and taking care of each other.

Also, our society has become habituated to control, and uncomfortable with uncertainty and the indefinite. A child, accordingly, must be under someone's official supervision at all times. Whether it is the bus driver, the school, the daycare worker or the camp counselor, someone must always be in loco parentis. Someone must always be in control. The child must always be accounted for. There is no room for the liminal space, the exploratory zone, the adventure, the unknown. The same mindset also manifests in the expansion of legal liability into every aspect of public life. In a world under control, if something bad happens, it must be someone's fault.

Finally, safety has become a top priority in our society—more important than freedom, more important than fun. We're large, that priority informs the National Security state. Why should safety be our number one priority? Who puts self-preservation above anything else? A person disconnected from life's purpose,

disconnected from service, and disconnected from the creative impulse, that's who. Our economic system, educational system, and metaphysics all promote that disconnection. The dominant teaching of both economics and evolutionary biology is that all beings are driven to maximize their self-interest (in economics, financial self-interest; in biology, reproductive self-interest).

Unfortunately without an element of danger or uncertainty there is no such thing as an adventure, and therefore no opportunity for children to explore their boundaries, develop self-confidence, and become comfortable with uncertainty. Constant supervision is harmful for a child's development, because it signals to them: "You are not worthy of trust." No wonder our children react introvertedly when they become teens.

When an adventure has been cut off, what is left? Fake adventures, in the form of video games and virtual-realities online. There are consequence-free zones in which nothing really bad can happen, and nothing you do really matters. In raising my own children I've done my best to limit screen time and make them go outdoors—no easy task when most of the other kids are safely parked in front of their screens. And, it turns out, a terribly risky proposition. I'm not so afraid of kidnapping, drowning or any of the other terrible things that truly could happen to my unsupervised children. And they could happen. Life isn't safe. What I have been afraid of is having my children taken away because I let them enjoy some unsupervised play, which is what happened to an 11-year-old boy in Florida.

It's time to reclaim the kingdom of childhood. For me, personally, I'm looking to move with my family to a place more aligned with my parenting values. But ultimately we need a shift in values everywhere.

I recently had an opportunity to speak at Lohengarten, an ecovillage in Steyerberg, Germany. This is one of the

earliest centers of the modern permaculture movement, but what impressed me the most were the children I saw playing, unsupervised, outside. I suppose this shouldn't be that impressive—after all, in traditional contexts unsupervised play is the norm.

In the United States, though, huge social (and even legal) pressure demands that children be constantly supervised. I keep reading news stories of parents who are arrested for child endangerment because their children went to the playground themselves, got on a bus themselves, etc. Sometimes it seems that more supervision isn't enough. Our 2-year-old, Gus, plays on a jungle gym without any hovering hands ready to catch him—which sometimes seems to upset other parents at the playground.

We hope to install in Gus the self-confidence that comes when his parents judge him capable of making decisions and recognizing risks. We also think it important that he be allowed to make mistakes and feel their natural consequences. Overprotected children learn that the only consequences to be feared are those imposed by authority (i.e., getting in trouble). That works for a while, until they become teenagers and realize that parental consequences are easily avoided (by deceiving their parents). Then, having internalized the idea that these are the only consequences to be feared, they act as if nothing they do could have any consequences. Overprotection gives birth to recklessness.

I suppose it might be important to say this to all of this magazine's readership, but I often encourage my 10-year-old son, Philip, to come with his friends through the neighborhood (and I have the second pair). This was entirely normal when I was a child, we'd wander the miles. That today this is considered a crime breaks the rising tide of fear that grips my country. "Safety first," the

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Finally, safety has become a top priority in our society—more important than freedom, more important than fun. Writ large, that priority informs the National Security state. Why should safety be our number-one priority? Who puts self-preservation above anything else? A person disconnected from life's purpose, disconnected from service, and disconnected from the creative impulse, that's who. Our economic system, educational system, and metaphysics all promote that disconnection. The dominant teaching of both economics and evolutionary biology is that all beings are driven to maximize their self-interest (in economics, financial self-interest; in biology, reproductive self-interest).

Unfortunately, without an element of danger or uncertainty there is no such thing as an adventure, and therefore no opportunity for children to explore their boundaries, develop self-confidence, and become comfortable with uncertainty. Constant supervision is harmful for a child's development, because it signals to them: "You are not worthy of trust." No wonder our children enact untrustworthiness when they become teens.

When real adventure has been cut off, what is left? Fake adventures, in the form of video games and virtual realities online. These are consequence-free zones in which nothing really bad can happen, and nothing you do really matters. In raising my own children I've done my best to limit screen time and make them go outdoors—no easy task when most of the other kids

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It's time to reclaim the kingdom of childhood. For me, personally, I'm seeking to move with my family to a place more aligned with my parenting values. But ultimately we need a shift in values everywhere.

I recently had an opportunity to speak at Lebensgarten, an ecovillage in Steyersberg, Germany. This is one of the earliest centers of the modern permaculture movement, but what impressed me the most were the children I saw playing, unsupervised, outside. I suppose this shouldn't be that impressive—after all, in traditional contexts unsupervised play is the norm.

In the United States, though, huge social (and even legal) pressure demands that children be constantly supervised. I keep reading news stories of parents who are arrested for child endangerment because their children went to the playground themselves, got on a bus themselves, etc. Sometimes it seems that mere supervision isn't enough. Our 2-year-old, Cary, plays on a jungle gym without any hovering hands ready to catch him—which sometimes seems to upset other parents at the playground.

We hope to instill in Cary the self-confidence that comes when his parents judge him capable of making decisions and recognizing risks. We also think it important that he be allowed to make mistakes and feel their natural consequences. Overprotected children learn that the only consequences to be feared are those imposed by authority (i.e., getting in trouble). That works for a while, until they become teenagers and realize that parental consequences are easily avoided (by deceiving their parents). Then, having internalized the idea that these are the only consequences to be feared, they act as if nothing they do could have any consequences. Overprotection gives birth to recklessness.

I suppose it might be imprudent to say this to all of this magazine's readership, but I often encourage my 10-year-old son, Philip, to roam with his friends through the neighborhood (and I have for several years). This was entirely normal when I was a child; we'd wander for miles. That today this is considered a crime bespeaks the rising tide of fear that grips my country. "Safety first," the saying goes. Really, though? Is that our highest value? Is it unquestionable

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that safety should trump freedom, fun or adventure?

Yes, Cary could quite easily fall off the jungle gym and suffer permanent injury. Philip could get hurt, molested, or kidnapped. Such things happen. The world is not safe. It would be much safer to keep them inside all the time, living a virtual life in front of screens. These screens provide the substitute adventures children crave when the real thing is unavailable.

Herein lies yet another form of insidious programming: to abide in a virtual world where the consequences of our actions are virtual as well. How convenient for the status quo if our resistance is safely contained in the Internet—if we are conditioned to think the 3-D public space is off-limits except with the permission and supervision of authority. We feel, then, that it is not our space. That is why I thought the basic meme of Occupy was so significant a few years ago: It challenged a very deep programming.

The mantra “safety first” reflects a society that is addicted to control and bereft of its sense of purpose. Transposed onto politics, it appears as the security state enslaved to an irrational and hyperbolic fear of terrorism, and a compulsion to “supervise” the world through electronic surveillance.

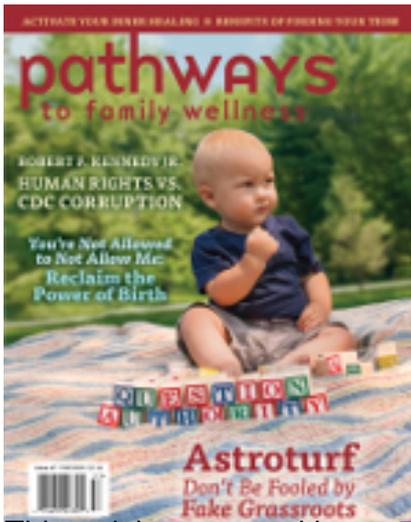
On any level, from the personal to the political, the fixation on safety makes sense only in disconnection from purpose. A person in touch with her purpose puts her gifts in service to that, and doesn't act as if the most important thing in life were merely to survive. In the same vein, a nation in service to the planet will not be fixated on national security.

The playgrounds I often see in my country, with their hovering parents, make me nostalgic for the lost scenes of my childhood: boys and girls playing jump rope or cops-and-robbers, riding bikes far and wide. It feels gratifying to see these scenes reenacted at a place like Lebensgarten. It reminds me that I am not crazy for wanting to raise my children in trust.

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