



NATURE KNOWS BEST

The dramatic recent rise in popularity – and official acceptance – of Forest Schools is in part a parental reaction against the technologising of their children, and an answer to anxieties over ‘Nature Deficit Disorder’. In this section GILL BARRON enquires into some aspects of this new wave of enthusiasm for land-based education.

BUNKING OFF FROM BABYLON

When the beeping, pinging rum-pus of modern machinery becomes intolerable, the dream of a quiet forest to run to, or hills to head for, is irresistible. We have so many colourful role-models, expounding the romance of solitude – St. Jerome in his cave with a lion, Robin Hood and his Merry Men and token Maid, Thoreau with his bean-patch at Walden Pond, or Dongas up trees in the Hampshire countryside. The trouble is, nowadays, it's so hard to get access to that sanity-saving wilderness. Where is it? Who owns it? Must one say ‘please’? As adults we are, or can choose to be, self-propelled, and assuage our need for nature temporarily with a trip to the placebo city park. But children, less free, cannot choose where they go – and far fewer of them are even aware of nature as an option. So what will become of them?

Far from being a sentimental lament for a bygone idyll, this is an alarm bell: something very drastic has happened, very quickly, to childhood and society has not had time to catch up with the implications. Meanwhile, the days of childhood wasted can never be retrieved, and there are valid fears that the species, now and for generations to come, is being subverted by techno-forces way beyond our control. The first thing we have to do to hold back this tide is to ensure that the present crop of children have a sensible, broad-ranging childhood that equips them to know and love this Earth, their inheritance, and understand why we must all look after it.

Older generations – today's grandparents – grew up in a world where kids were packed off outdoors all day to amuse themselves. Despite muttered warnings from parents about “strangers with sweeties” (which was never explained) adults were to be trusted and, sometimes, obeyed. There were few toys, and fewer entertainments: the Saturday Morning Pictures and the Beano, if you were lucky, and Andy Pandy and the Woodentops if you weren't. So we poked about in puddles with sticks, made bows and arrows, climbed trees, played conkers, filled the bath with frogspawn, mucked about. (All the things which



Mum, Dad, and an unfashionably large number of siblings – but not a plastic toy or telly screen or child-rearing philosophy in sight. Deprived? With hindsight, maybe not.

are now formalised by Forest Schools.) We had “best friends” and gangs and siblings and socialised one another. Even wealthier children were left to their own devices a good deal, and in the long summer holidays, “ran wild”.

By the standards of today, we were deprived. The present generation of parents (the 30–40 year olds) still had a good deal of freedom when young: “benign neglect”, you could call it. But now, if they let their own children play out unsupervised, they stand accused of *malign* neglect: putting their offspring at risk from all manner of quasi-imaginary dangers.

The paranoia industry flourishes on the back of media scaremongering, and society, and the schools' culture, mops it up. Schools have high security gates, children are mostly delivered to the doorstep by car, and contact with a world assumed to be threatening is cut to a minimum.

Not only are kids taught not to trust any adult outside a tiny charmed circle, but also un-related adults who speak to children, share a joke (or tick them off when the need arises) are viewed with suspicion. The result is children who are increasingly feral. They are also, just possibly, affected by domestic poisons:

“The Environmental Protection Agency now warns us that indoor air pollution is the nation's number one environmental threat to health – and it's from two to ten times worse than outdoor air pollution. A child indoors is more susceptible to spores of toxic moulds growing under that plush carpet; or bacteria or allergens carried by household vermin; or carbon monoxide, radon and lead dust. The allergen level of newer, sealed buildings can be as much as two hundred times greater than that of older structures.”

So says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, who is a leading voice blowing some fresh air into the way children are raised and schools are run. He goes on to quote Jane Clark, a University of Maryland professor, talking about “containerized kids”:

“A generation of children is not only being raised indoors, but is being confined to even smaller spaces. They spend more and more time in car seats, high chairs, and even baby seats for watching TV. When small children go outside, they’re often placed in sealed containers – strollers – and pushed by walking or jogging parents. . . Most kid-contain-erizing is done for safety concerns, but the long term health of these children is compromised.”

A study back in 2010 – even before the phenomenal rise of Apple’s iPad and other tablets – estimated that by the age of 10 children had access to an average of five screens in their lives. Now, in addition to the main family TV, many young children have their own bedroom telly along with portable computer game consoles (Nintendo, PlayStation, Xbox), smartphone, family computer and a laptop and/or a tablet computer.

“By the age of seven the average child will have spent a full year of 24-hour days watching recreational screen media. Over the course of childhood, children spend more time watching TV than they spend in school. More screens means more consumption, and more medical problems.”¹

Harvard clinical psychologist and school consultant, Catherine Steiner-Adair has studied the impact of digital technology on infant brain development. Her work confirms that much of the problem stems from parents, either using media as a convenient ‘babysitter’, or just pursuing their own interests at the expense of their children:

“Her research found that 70 percent of kids think their parents spend too much time on devices, and accuse their parents of double standards. Parents know that to establish rules for their children they need to be role models too. So that means putting your phone down when around the kids, and trying not to eat every meal in front of the TV. Look out for “technology-based interruptions in parent–child interactions” – a phenomenon known as “technofence”, which seems to correlate with children being more prone to whining, sulking, restlessness, frustration and outbursts of temper.”²

Techno-addiction doesn’t count as benign neglect, though some kids might welcome the space given by non-meddling parents. Because, at the other extreme of childcare, lies the ‘Neontocracy’, a newly coined name for:

“a world that revolves around the needs of children far beyond the basics of food and material comfort. Here, it is considered vital to maintain children’s happiness, status, self-esteem and protection, and for parents to do their own child-care, and schedule life-enhancing activities for their kids, providing constant stimulation.”

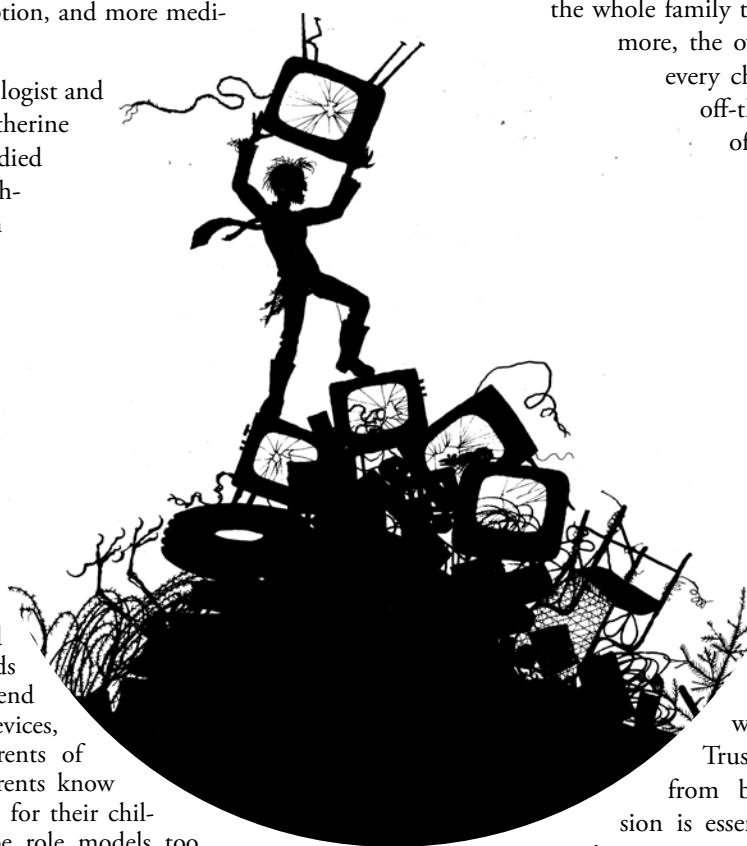
According to anthropologist David Lancy, of Utah State University this is increasingly the parenting ideal in the WEIRD world – Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic societies demand such high-maintenance regimes, to allay the existential anxieties of a pressurised world – by creating even more pressure. Lancy says it’s a recipe for producing ‘kid-ults’, ill-prepared to enter the complex adult world.³

Smother-mothering (not confined to female parents) includes bed-sharing, on-demand feeding, and continuous one-to-one playtime: attachment parenting in other words. Lancy shows that the “dubious threat” of “reactive attachment disorder” is a bit of a nonsense and that if such practices don’t work for the whole family they should be abandoned. What’s more, the over-emphasis on the happiness of every child, implemented by compulsory off-the-peg entertainment, robs them of the right to be bored, and to learn through independent observation of the real world around them; the chance to enjoy its wonder and adjust to its imperfections.

Boredom is Freedom

There is only one way through this minefield of modern childhood. As Pink Floyd sang years ago: *Teacher, leave them kids alone!*. Kids need to be given back their right to roam, and parents be freed of the stigma that comes with *non-attachment* parenting. Trust is key. Allowing solitude, away from breathing-down-the-neck supervision is essential, to discover the pleasure of one’s own company and to find out that ‘alone’ is not the same as ‘lonely’.

And there’s no need to have a vast wilderness on the doorstep – the child can have an experience of awe and wonder by just watching ordinary living things with close attention. Appreciation of the naturally beautiful develops a deep emotional intelligence; the very antithesis of nature deficit disorder. The wonders of this planet, as shown on TV by David Attenborough, are as nothing beside those sudden, unpredictable moments of awe looking into the eyes of Nature, which each of us must encounter for ourselves.⁴



1. *Managing Screen Time and Screen Dependency* Dr Aric Sigman, quoted in <http://www.techadvisor.co.uk>. Simon Jary, 10.10.2017

2. Steiner-Adair, Catherine *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*. HarperCollins 2013

3. Lancy, David: *Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures*. Cambridge University Press 2017. Reviewed in New Scientist, 14.10.17 p44

4. Henderson, Caspar: *A New Map of Wonders*: University of Chicago Press Books, 2017