Where Do the Children Play?

A Study Guide to the Film

EDITED BY Elizabeth Goodenough
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When the first settlers came to America, they brought with them a rich heritage of children’s play dating back to antiquity. Throughout recorded history, children played in much the same way until the latter two or three decades of the twentieth century when a radical transformation took place, changing both the context and nature of free, spontaneous play. During this brief period the play of American children came under stress from a collective set of influences that threatened their health, learning, and physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Just how this came about is quite a story, remarkable for its speed and negative impact.

The play of children is extensively documented by archeological remains dating back to pre-recorded eras and in the writing of prominent philosophers and educators throughout antiquity, the medieval and Renaissance periods and
the pre-modern and modern eras. Country children played in natural surroundings which differed across geographical areas—hills, wilderness, streams, ponds, rivers, fields, plains, barnyards, deserts, and swamps. Not unlike their country counterparts, city children played wherever they happened to be—in streets, vacant lots, shops, factories, back yards, seaports, and in smaller towns and villages, the surrounding countryside. No matter the context or the demands placed on them, children found places and made time for play. They created their own games, made toys from simple, natural materials, played the games passed down for centuries, and cunningly outfoxed adults to transform work into play. The differences between the aristocracy or the well-to-do and the masses living in poverty or under unspeakable conditions have always been profound, but, except in the most brutal conditions of war, abuse, and natural disaster, play found a means for expression.

Remarkably, yet understandably, given play’s universality and benefits, even the greatest of the ancient philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian recognized the importance of play for children and promoted its role in education and development.

Others echoed advocacy of play through the centuries to follow. Luther, Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, and many other great observers and thinkers spoke for play’s physical, intellectual, learning, and moral values and contributed to its centuries-old acceptance and cultivation.

Around the turn of the twentieth century several child-centered movements in America, including the child-saving movement, the play and playground movement, and the child study movement, led to the development of playgrounds in cities and research on play at universities. By that time the largest cities were crowded, with huge pockets of poverty, and safe outdoor play places were disappearing. Orphans were everywhere in the slums and many children were assigned backbreaking work in factories. Despite such conditions, children managed to play. Country children, having ready access to farms and wilderness, played as country children have always played, having nature itself as a playground, perhaps the finest of settings for free, creative, spontaneous play.

During the final decades of the twentieth century, the age of technology and related cultural factors began to change children’s play in profound ways. Children were staying indoors to play with their tech toys, while all the time making regular trips to the refrigerator for junk food. Kept informed about predators waiting just outside the door, and wall-to-wall coverage of child kidnappings and abuse by the media, parents became increasingly fearful, even paranoid, and warned their children to stay inside. Outdoor play in streets and nearby parks was increasingly abandoned. All this was implicated in a grow
ing incidence of previously rare health problems, even among very young children—obesity, early signs of heart disease, diabetes, and related emotional and mental disorders.

During the early 1980s national playground safety standards were developed and rapidly implemented, resulting in traditional playground equipment being replaced by new equipment, standardized to meet safety specifications. These specifications gave attorneys the fuel to present elaborate, technical arguments in litigation, frequently resulting in legal judgments against schools, parks, child care centers, and individuals.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the threat of lawsuits had become so pervasive that all parties involved with the development or use of playgrounds were at risk—manufacturers, architects, installers, school administrators, teachers, nurses, and doctors.

Even injuries resulting from contact with common and natural materials on playgrounds such as rocks, tree roots, stumps, and fences, though not classified as manufactured playground equipment, could result in legal scrutiny and potential liability. As the safety standards became ever more extensive, complex, and confusing, playgrounds became more standardized and cookie-cutter in appearance and function and were frequently described as “dumbed down,” meaning void of challenge and fun.

By 2007, such criticism was resulting in manufacturers searching for ways to circumvent the safety standards or modify them to allow greater heights, greater thrills, and greater challenges and risks, and school districts across the country were deleting or reducing recess and imposing “risk-free” rules on children at play. Traditional games were banned in many places, including tag, chase, dodge ball, tether ball, football, soccer, and in even more extreme cases, all games involving human contact. Perhaps the height of irresponsible, damaging regulation was reached when one school posted signs, NO RUNNING ON THE PLAYGROUND, and some school districts decided not to provide playgrounds at their schools.

Another form of standardization emerged with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, or high-stakes testing. Created primarily by politicians, this illogical, ill-informed program quickly resulted in punitive measures against low-performing schools and their teachers, administrators, children, and parents. Researchers found little validity to claims of rapid progress on tests, especially among the poor and minorities, and uncovered wholesale cheating and growing disillusionment and rejection of the program by teachers and parents. The content of tests had become essentially a national curriculum and children’s play was not included. The results of the testing mania were widespread and punishing to children.
Recess was abandoned by a growing number of schools to make more time for teaching the tests. Some schools were built without playgrounds, ostensibly to avoid injuries and lawsuits, or closer to reality, because many adults failed to understand the developmental values of children’s free play in outdoor playgrounds or were fearful that their schools and children might be designated “low performing.” Despite the immense amount of erudition (historical, scientific, sociological, literary) available through the cultural lens of play, the fear of injury, lawsuits, abduction, school failure, and misunderstanding the values of play collectively unraveled centuries of openness to challenging play and play environments, both natural and built, and now threatens the health and welfare of American children and growing numbers in other countries.

There are indications that children’s spontaneous outdoor play may be resulting in slowly making its way back up the staircase. The looming threats to nature are influencing groups throughout America to reintroduce children to play in nature, and to cultivation of nature in neighborhoods and school grounds. The National Wildlife Federation certifies schoolyard habitats nationwide. Common Good works to bring common sense back to lawsuits; KaBoom and other organizations construct playgrounds in poverty areas and areas decimated by natural disasters. The Voice of Play prepares papers promoting the values of play for publication in various journals. The Strong National Museum of Play opened in 2007. Legislators are addressing problems of high-stakes testing, out-of-control lawsuits, and the need for recess and physical education. Dozens of professional organizations never abandoned their stands for outdoor play and play environments and valid assessment of children’s progress, and seek ways to reintroduce reason and scientific study into decisions that affect children. Now we see the “no child left behind culture” gradually being countered by an emerging movement committed to the slogan, “no child left inside.”

Is play worth all this effort? The answer is a resounding, “Yes.” Perhaps on no other issue in education and child development is the historical and scientific evidence clearer. Play is essential for problem-solving, social and cognitive skills, imagination, creativity, therapeutic relief from trauma, passing on culture, and physical development and health. To put it romantically but accurately: spontaneous play is the delicate dance of childhood that strengthens the mind and body, and nourishes the soul. Our task is to save spontaneous, creative, outdoor play and play environments for children.
It was an uncharacteristically sunny day in London just before I left in May.

I sat in the garden enjoying the bright warmth and catching glimpses of my daughter Charlie and her friend Eire, whom she had met at the local climbing wall, through the pink-white blossom and the very green, still, spring leaves. The blackbirds were showing off again.

The girls were scrambling up and down her climbing frame and throwing each other jokes, weaving a living den from tendrils of overgrown Russian vine. They were covered in mud from their games with the rainwater barrel, watering her newly planted garden.

They had twigs and blossoms tangled in their hair, and they were wearing a curious mixture of everyday and dressing up clothes.

They stopped to consult swiftly, then charged down the garden path towards the house, paus
ing only to lift a paving slab so that Charlie could introduce Eire to her pet centipede. Then on they scibbled.

Then off galumphing up the stairs.

This is all very enchanting. However, I am sharing this snippet of domesticity with you because as a playworker I look at this story with a particular methodology in mind.

The first is that storytelling allows us faithfully to represent the playing of children. We can mirror their experiences with our words.

The second is that these girls were playing in an “enriched” and “holding” play environment. This situation allows time and space for the children to play freely and safely in an environment that is filled with a broad range of opportunities for many different play types (Hughes & Winnicott).

The third is the presence of a playful adult who attends the playing but does not “adulterate” it by interrupting with an adult agenda (Sturrock).

The fourth is that within this short story are represented about 13 examples of different play types. I am referring here to the 16 Playtypes identified by Bob Hughes from current scientific research in his Taxonomy.

For almost all of my working life, I have been a senior playworker on an adventure playground in London. Where I work is inclusive, welcoming children with a wide range of disabilities and their peers.

It is not, financially, a wealthy site. What we do have is sole use of a fenced area with a natural environment and a building to play inside. We have children and a staff team. And we have lots of “loose parts” (Nicholson). These are things that can be anything. Some are toys, but mostly we have stones and hunks of wood and endless yards of fabric, rope, tires, old kitchen equipment, leaves, dressing up clothes, paint, cooking stuff, Christmas decorations, and glitter. I am never quite sure if I should count sand and water in this list, but for our purposes here, I will. Most of this equipment has been scrounged, found or bought cheaply.

I have never had a day there that has not contained at least one miracle. Some moment was revealing, or a child or group of children showed their genius for play.

Inspectors sometimes come to visit and ask to see our timetable of activities. We don’t have any such thing. It is laughable to think that we should. We work much harder than that.

How could I timetable Jan’s “Moment of Wonder”?

Jan is on the Autistic spectrum. He doesn’t use speech and, because of various medical and personal factors, we have risk-assessed him as needing the support of a one-to-one worker so that he can play in safety.

On this playground, like many others in the UK, parents leave their children at the playground, in the care of the playworkers for a whole day.
If you consider the times of your own rich playing, then I am sure that you will not associate an adult as being a part of that play. As workers with Jan and any other child, the playworker in the play environment must not adulterate the playframe of the child.

Children’s play is “behaviour that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated” (Playwork Principles 2005 with reference to many sources). This small phrase describing play can sound so glib and easy on the ear. But every time I unpack it, its meaning, the depth of what it captures, catches my breath.

So, when we meet Jan in play, we use what he does, what we observe of him, his interests and passions, as a starting point for coaxing him into a world of free play. Like so many disabled children, Jan didn’t have the chance to direct his own playing before he came to our site.

He was play-deprived.

So, we mirror him. We don’t rush up to him and try to become his friend. Our own desire to be popular is an adulteration of the agenda. However, by mirroring his playing, we can get a sense of what he is getting from it. Some of the characteristics familiar to people who play with children with Autism, such as scrabbling, rocking, clapping and hand flickering, make sense when you try them out for yourself. Through joining him in his activities we can show him that his playing is important; we validate it and show that we are interested in it too.

We are not trying to Normalise him.

Inevitably, the child will begin to meet us through the triangulation of the activity, and the agenda is set. “Here, you can play and we value your playing.” (Our one playground rule is, “Play as you want to here, but try not to hurt yourself or anyone else.” This is an Infinite Rule. It is endlessly adaptable and flexible.)

Jan’s Wonder happened on a bright London day like the one in the garden story about my daughter that I started with. I was working with him and observing him, very closely, from as far away as possible. At a certain point, he stopped in his tracks and backed up a pace or two. He then began an uncharacteristic rocking movement, which he kept up for ages, rocking forward and back. I was curious to see what he was doing and stepped a little closer, mirroring his action, stance and movement. I understood and crept away again to leave him in peace.

Now, in many settings an Autistic child rocking back and forth would have been either ignored or interrupted by staff hustling the child away because the child was being obsessive (and the adults were indulging in adulteration).

But my wonderful colleagues, one by one, noticed Jan’s movement, thought it curious, mirrored it, understood, smiled to themselves and walked away.

Jan had shown us all his Wonder: he walked past a tree and caught the sun bursting around the trunk. He had been so amazed and struck by
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of dry, pure powder paint over his head. Layer after layer of vibrant colour tumbled over him, sometimes mushing into mud colours, sometimes a pure vibrant confusion of colour. Which of us could find a way so perfectly to express the multiple layers of desperate confusion and love that this child was experiencing?

These amazing things are happening at eighty adventure playgrounds in London and many more throughout the UK, and wherever else children are allowed to play freely.

The adventure play movement grew from the work of Lady Allen of Hurtwood who, inspired by the work of the Danish architect Sorensen, made up her mind to create a movement of adventure playgrounds on the bombsites of the UK after World War II. These spaces were dedicated solely to the free playing of children and overseen by “Wardens.” Children could play in sand and mud and water; they could make gardens and dig caves and use wood and tools to make dens and climbing structures. They built fires and cooked their food. The Wardens observed and reflected on the playing of the children. They worked out ways to protect and enhance these environments and quickly came to understand that the playgrounds were community hubs.

From the sharing of this work, the profession of Playwork grew. As Wardens talked together, they realised that the playing that they saw was universal and that their responses were universal too. They realised that the same sort of play is vital in the lives of all children. Lady Allen quickly realised that this applied to disabled children as well, and established a string of playgrounds designed to meet their needs, allowing them to play alongside their peers.

And now?

In the UK, we can study play at Vocational, Degree and Masters levels. We have an established profession of people who rejoice in relinquishing power to children and who celebrate quirkiness. We are there for the children, but we do not dominate their play. We support and encourage it, and always we learn from it.

A playworker friend of mine told me about a session around a campfire. One of the kids present was a bit of a handful; he has ADHD. But as he sat and watched the fire, he became calm. He said to my friend, “Mo, when I grow up, I want to be a flame.”

When I watch a playground of children at work, I am aware of the process, not the product. I see a complexity and an intricacy and a beauty that is like a dance, but more than that.

I see the internal worlds of so many people, freed up and coming out to play together in a dedicated space in the external world. It is what Winnicott describes as the ideal way of living.

Coming at the world creatively.

Constantly seeing the world anew.

A lifetime burning in every moment.
Four-year-old Sean bounced around the office, searching the toy shelves. He rejected the doll house, board games, blocks and puzzles. Finally he picked up a stuffed dog and stared at it in puzzlement. “What does it do?” he asked. “You can make him talk,” I suggested. “But how?” he wondered, looking for a button or string. “Like this,” I answered, picking up a stuffed cat and talking through it in a funny voice. Sean was enchanted. As a child bombarded by the incessant noise from a commercialized, electronic media culture, he never before invested an inanimate object with life. When it came to make-believe, he had no idea how to play.

The ability to play is central to our capacity to take risks, to experiment, to think critically, to act rather than react, to solve problems, to differentiate ourselves from our envi
environment, and to make life meaningful. Play is a fundamental component of a healthy childhood and linked inextricably to creativity. Providing and preserving physical space for children to play are essential to their health and well-being. But psychological space is essential as well. Children are born with the capacity to imagine. But by allowing them to be bombarded with noise by the bells and whistles of commercialized technology and the things it sells, we are depriving children of the social and emotional space for generating make-believe.

**D.W. Winnicott:**
**Play, Creativity, and Health**

D.W. Winnicott, a brilliant British pediatrician and psychoanalyst who practiced in the mid-twentieth century, first delineated a psychological space for play. He conceptualized “transitional space” neither wholly within our inner psychic reality nor wholly in the world external to us but in the overlap of the two. “In playing,” Winnicott wrote, “the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling.”¹ In plainer language, we play when we actively use external objects and ideas to express our own, unique inner lives, fantasies, and feelings. Winnicott talked about play as synonymous to creativity, as a means of honest expression, as health, and as healing.

Winnicott also identified the psycho-social environment essential to enabling play. He believed that play can only occur in the context of a “facilitating” or “holding” environment provided by any nurturing relationship simultaneously secure enough to be safe and relaxed enough to provide room for spontaneity. A “holding environment” begins literally with the way a baby is held. Is the baby safe in her caretaker’s arms? Does the baby have enough space to move freely? A baby who doesn’t feel safe must hold still for fear of falling. A baby who is held too tightly can’t explore movement.

As the baby is held securely, but not in a constricting way, she makes some kind of gesture different from random flailing. Because the gesture seems purposeful to her parents, they respond with a coo, a smile or a laugh. In that interchange are the seeds of two important developmental changes. By originating an action that evokes a separate reaction from her environment, the baby begins to establish a sense of herself as separate being. She begins to learn to differentiate herself from her parent. The knowledge that we are separate beings from our caretakers is an essential foundation for healthy growth and development. If, as babies, our early actions generate coos and hugs and smiles from the important adults in our lives, something equally momentous occurs. We experience our burgeoning self as making good things happen in the world.
An inadequate holding environment is filled with failures that compromise safety, or constantly bombards the baby with demands to react, rather than initiate action. Suppose an infant makes a gesture and gets no response. Suppose he generates a gesture and elicits anger instead of support. Suppose parents are so busy eliciting responses (“Do this!” “Smile.” “Do that!”) that he has no space even to try to generate an action.

In the absence of a holding environment—whether from neglect or incessant demands to respond—a child develops a reactive, or “false,” self instead of a true- or creative-self that flourishes in a holding environment. Creativity, or constructive spontaneity, in contrast to the constant compliance or reactivity demanded by an “impinging” environment, is at the core of Winnicott’s conception of mental health.

As babies develop, Winnicott believed that they reach a point at which they begin to separate from their mothers but have not yet internalized enough of the mother’s strength and security to survive alone. To cope with the conflicting needs for separation and for attachment, babies create “transitional objects.” This motley collection of blankets and bears appear as a baby begins the transition from total dependence to independence. According to Winnicott, these items “live” in the intersection of our inner and outer worlds; they are transitional in that they gradually lose their importance. For a period of time, however, these objects actually represent children’s relationship to their parents. They become crucial for comfort, or for going to sleep at night. In fact they sometimes seem to be even more important than actual parents because children cannot bear to be parted from them.

These cuddlies live in the intersection of inner and outer reality and, paradoxically, belong to both. Eventually, they just lose importance in children’s lives. A security blanket may end up in the back of a linen closet. A stuffed tiger might be consigned to a shelf. Something very wonderful happens as those blankets and toys become less and less important to their creators. What remains, even as children become adults, is the experience of a kind of psychological space that is simultaneously internal and external, real and not real, me and not me. Within the space once occupied by their beloved transitional object, they continue to assign personal, powerful meaning to objects from the outer world, molding and shaping those objects to give tangible shape to dreams, ideas and fantasies. It is in this space that play—creative play—takes place. According to Winnicott—and I agree with him—it is when we are playing that we express our true, creative selves.

**Consumer Culture:**

**Endangering Children’s Play**

Play comes naturally to children. They play,
TEN WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN LOVE NATURE

All spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder and one of the first windows to wonder is the natural world.

Richard Louv

What if we could help children find a relationship with something that inspires, balances, soothes and invigorates them? Something that is always available, no matter where they are, that is abundant and free of charge? That “something” is within our reach; a relationship with the natural world offers all this and more.

Nature is good for children and the communities they live in. Research shows that contact with nature raises students’ test scores, reduces absenteeism, and improves cognitive functioning. Children’s ADHD symptoms decline when their play areas are “greener.”

However, in today’s culture time spent in nature is considered non-essential.

Most of us take nature for granted or ignore it altogether. We are one with nature, but our actions do not reflect that reality. When

These suggestions are offered by Avery Cleary, executive director of Hooked On Nature, a nonprofit organization created to inspire adults to help children develop loving relationships with the Earth, each other and all that is. Please visit www.hookedonnature.org for additional ideas and resources.
children watch us, what do they see? What do they hear? What might they come to believe based on our actions?

We have become a culture of “indoor thinkers.” We tend to think of nature as mountains, deserts, hiking trails and beaches. Something removed from our day-to-day lives. But nature is also the smell of the air after a rainstorm, the sound of the wind in the trees, stars overhead in the night sky, and pets we love. It’s the apple in our lunch box, the air we breathe, and the water we drink. Nature is everywhere.

If children are to feel a part of the mysterious, wild world of nature, they require unstructured time to play, explore and discover. They also need adults in their lives who model connecting with the natural world.

Here are some suggestions to help us slow down enough to feel—and help our children feel—that nature is part of us and we are part of it.

1) Say hello to your neighbors. Find out who has more than two legs. Who has wings? Has feathers or fur? Who swims in the water? Lives up a tree or in the ground?

2) Take a walk in the rain. Try jumping in puddles, making mud pies, blowing bubbles, and laughing a lot.

3) Cloud watching can be fun, relaxing and full of surprises. See what happens when you lie on your back and allow your mind and body to relax. Enjoy the show!

4) Imagine that! Lie down under a tree and look up into the branches. Listen to the sounds of nature and let your imagination soar.

5) Make a new friend. Find a friend in nature—perhaps a rock, a tree or a stream. Visit your friend as often as you can and see what they have to say.

6) Embrace the creepy crawlies. Keep children as safe as necessary, but not as safe as possible. Let them explore, investigate, and challenge themselves. Refrain from negative reactions when they get dirty, wet, or touch bugs and worms. Help them understand and respect the natural world without creating fear. Show enthusiasm and curiosity about their explorations.

7) Explore the world around you. Trips to the Grand Canyon or the ocean can inspire awe, but the nearby nature around us everyday can be amazing too. Take a walk around the block, in a park, or explore a local stream. Explorations help children to feel that the world is a safe, interesting, and friendly place.

8) Bring the outdoors in. Children can adopt a houseplant, care for a pet, and keep a weather journal by writing how they feel about it. Sit comfortably and watch the raindrops on the window. Trace patterns with your finger and make up stories about the raindrops’ journey. When children are old enough to want facts, provide the resources
for them to find the answers. Libraries, children’s museums, local nature centers and the internet are great places to help children discover things for themselves.

9) Say good night to the moon. Including nature in your everyday routines gives children something to look forward to, something they can count on.

10) Experience the wonder of nighttime. Find a place away from city lights where you can lie down and take in the night sky. Tell each other stories about the sky. Sleep out under the stars and experience the wonder of it all!

11) Relax and enjoy your time together outside! Remember that our children are watching us! The most powerful way for each of us to influence is with our own presence. When you take time to connect, reflect and share your own experiences of nature, you become a living example for your children.

Here is a sampling of books, websites, initiatives and articles that offer information and ideas to rekindle the spirit of childhood in each of us. May these resources spark further exploration and creativity.

**Websites**

- Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.org
- American Association for the Child’s Right to Play: www.ipausa.org
- Arbor Day Foundation: www.arborday.org/explore/
- Children and Nature Network: www.childrenandnature.org
- Childcare Exchange: www.chidcareexchange.com
- Hooked On Nature: www.hookedonnature.org
- KaBoom!: www.kaboom.org
- National Wildlife Federation: www.greenhour.org
- Natural Learning Initiative: www.naturalearning.org
- Playing for Keeps: www.childrensmuseums.org/programs/playingforkeeps.htm
- River of Words: www.riverofwords.org
- Wild Zones: www.wild-zone.net

**Literature**

- *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv
- “Leave No Child Inside,” Richard Louv, Orion Magazine
- *Secret Spaces of Childhood*, Elizabeth Goodenough
- *A Sense Of Wonder*, Rachel Carson
- *Sharing the Joy of Nature with Children*, Joseph Cornell
- *Tales from Earth to Sky for the Young Child* (and those who spend time with them), Wendolyn Bird
- *There is a Flower at the Tip of My Nose Smelling Me*, Alice Walker
I saw
a lot of trees
I felt a part of nature.

¤ Shawn
Every now and then an adult grasps what a child is experiencing. You reach out and catch an invisible ball that’s been tossed your way. Even if your throw-back misses, the exchange brings pleasure and strengthens a growing bond of mutual understanding between you and that child. Empathy, unjustly maligned, proves, in such instances, both foundational and generative. Yet, how do we come to know our children’s inner worlds? What enables us, at such times, to meet them in the fullness of their imaginative play, their concentration, their joy, their desire, their quest, or in their sudden outbursts of mirth or anxiety? Whatever it is, it starts from birth. With regard to one barely month-old infant, for example, I heard a first-time father sagely say: “Max and I are getting to know one another.”

Since many adults erroneously assume they cannot re- evoke the details of their early years,
they turn to outside sources for help in understanding. Yet, when we try, we often can recall images, scenes, and incidents from the past. What about, for instance, the spoilt holiday season when your sister received a more beautiful, more elegantly accoutred doll than you did and you felt secretly overwhelmed by covetousness and envy? Or the time your beloved grandmother died and you were left all alone hurting and confused while the bereaved adults, attempting to assuage their own grief, attended to one another and ignored you? Or the Hallowe’en when you painted an oversized elaborately detailed picture of children “trick-or-treating” on a storefront window and won the contest so that your pigtail-framed face adorned the county newspaper? Still, it’s hard to rely on memory and projection. Wary of changes that history has wrought between the days of our youth and the present time, chary of differences as well as similarities between our children and ourselves, we turn to experts. We pore over guides and study manuals, as if childhood were a foreign country.

Since the publication of my new book, *The Brightening Glance: Imagination and Childhood* (2006), I have had opportunities to meet and talk with many wise strangers—parents, teachers, grandparents, childcare professionals, and others—who have shared stories with me. Several of these concern the acts of catching imaginary balls. Here are two such stories.

A youthful grandmother and her husband are taking care of their toddler grandson who is spending the night in their home. Earlier that day, entertained by other relatives, the little boy has watched the classic movie version of “The Wizard of Oz” (1939). Trying at nightfall to put him to bed, his grandmother meets with ferocious resistance. He refuses to go to sleep. Terrified, apparently, of the wicked witch in “The Wizard of Oz,” he fears the witch will come to get him! He cannot close his eyes. Trying to calm him down and comfort him, both grandparents trot out all their well-honed logic, rationality, and common sense. First, they muster verbal explanations: witches do not exist, they declare authoritatively. When, however, they realize the futility of this tack, they try systematically to demonstrate to the frightened child that no witches are lurking in the immediate vacinity. Carefully, they open all the drawers of the dresser, they draw aside the curtains, peer under the bed and the rug, inside the closet and behind all the clothes, even check outside the window. These acts, however, prove fruitless. Sitting tensely upright in his bed, the little one is unmoved by their rational procedure.

At her wit’s end, the grandmother suddenly senses the stroke of a lightning bolt! Abruptly, she gets it: She has caught the invisible ball. In a flash of inspiration, she disappears into the nearby bathroom. Filling up a plastic toothbrush glass with water, she brings it triumphantly to her exhausted but still anxious little grandson
who, by this time, is visibly fighting sleep.

“Look!” she declares: “Here! See this glass of water? I am going to put it right down, beside your bed, on the night table. If that wicked witch dares to come in here, you can just pour it all over her!”

With that, the little boy finally relaxes. With this intervention, he feels protected, understood, and can let himself fall off to sleep.

So, we might ask: what has happened? How did this grandmother accomplish her goal? It was, I would suggest, by entering fully and richly into her grandson’s imaginary world. It was by realizing that—to him—the witch was unquestionably, one hundred percent real. Once she accepted that premise, she could then go on to give him exactly what he needed in order to feel safe. She never explained to me quite how she got there, but I think this was because she herself did not know. Everything else had failed. And, this, after all, is how life (and art) often seem: we must fail and try and fail before getting it right.

Yet, catching the ball does not always involve content. Sometimes, it can mean just not interfering when children are deeply absorbed and want nothing more than to be allowed to continue their reveries.

Another lady told this story. Visiting recently in London’s National Gallery of Art, she had sat down to rest on a bench in front of a vast Venetian cityscape by Canaletto. To her surprise, a boy of about six was standing before the painting, his hands clasped behind him. He was alone as his parents had moved on casually to study other works. The little fellow stood riveted, his back to the world. He spent more time in front of the picture than any of the adult viewers who sauntered desultorily through the room. Being a total stranger, the lady said she hesitated to approach him, and, furthermore, she did not want to break his concentration. She was burning with curiosity, however, to know what it was about this picture that fascinated him so. Patiently, she watched and waited. The child’s parents never interfered or tried to hurry him away. They simply let him stand there as long as he wished, allowing him to commune in his own fashion with this vision of eighteenth-century Venice and with that teeming crowd gathering helter-skelter on the piazza to celebrate a saint’s day.

This, to me, is another invisible ball caught. Astonishing, wonderful, and all too rare: this respect for a child’s ability to be fascinated and enchanted, this respect for his gift for timeless preoccupation. While the American lady’s and his parents’ behaviour might seem at first blush like simple non-intervention or benign neglect, to the child it must have felt like a silent benediction. For, had the parents hurried him, he would have missed those precious moments with the work of art and the burgeoning of his own aesthetic sensibilities. His face, the lady reported,
when he finally turned away, was rapt.

So, a ball was caught, and yet, unlike the other story, the actual content of the child’s fantasy remained private, inviolate, inscrutable. What was empathically grasped was his need to look and think and be. That was sufficient. The catching here meant a ceding of control, a biting of the lip, a not-asking of questions, a letting go free.

Yet sometimes, as we all know, the otherness of children proves radically opaque. A ball simply drops. And although in *The Brightening Glance*, I emphasized the permeability of whatever membrane it is that separates us from childhood, still, all the young people we know and love and live with as well as the fading photographs of ourselves as children remind us that this membrane, although permeable, is not transparent. Aspects of children’s inner lives forever resist us. They whisper of worlds we can no longer reach. Through the looking glass. Over the rainbow. Second to the right and straight on till morning. Wistfully, I recall the final image of Ernst Gombrich’s (1955) provocative essay on the origins of the hobby horse: The way back to childhood is barred, he says, by an angel with a flaming sword.

**Notes**
But we have to be clear that good parenting is not necessarily about giving your kids things. It’s not necessarily protecting your kids from every problem. It’s not about signing them up for the greatest enrichment activities. It’s about listening. It’s about caring. It’s about loving. It’s about playing. It’s about reading. It’s about being there.

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