

RUB SOME DIRT ON IT

Tory Cooney
Copy Editor

Oh, the glorious days of childhood! How sweet it was to muck about in the creek, clutching at crawdads. How proud to convey them home in galvanized pails filched from the garage. How bracing to rend your feet on spitted fields of stubble as you best the boys in a footrace. And how divine to dock one in the eye when he insists he let you win because you're "just a girl."

Alas, those days are long gone, and not just for those of us who gave up grubbing in the lawn for stilettos and desk jobs, but for thousands of American children effectively under house arrest.

According to The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, a conservationist not-for-profit, American children currently spend less than four minutes per day in unstructured outdoor play, an all-time low in human history. And their health and wellbeing suffer because of it.

Spending time outdoors at a young age prevents and cures a mélange of physical and mental health ailments ranging from nearsightedness and social incompetence to ADHD and obesity — America's number one health problem that inflicts 12.5 million American children, incurs \$150 billion in annual

medical costs, and spurs on our \$50 billion diet industry (CDC). That's more than the GDP of Aruba or the cost of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Children are not to blame for watching well over 5,000 hours of television before entering kindergarten. Infants only want iPhones to gum, toddlers crave to beat them vigorously against the floor, and older children are still subject to the ubiquitous "Because I said so."

So, why aren't parents telling their children to go outside and run about like the little savages they are? The reason that they give is simple: paranoia.

On Cafemom.com, a popular parenting website, dozens of mothers responded to the question "When is a child old enough to play outside alone?" unleashing a wave of judgment and borderline hysteria from self-identified "helicopter moms."

"Maybe in backyard if you have 6 ft privacy fence. If it was the front yard then you should always be out with them because it's dangerous!"

"In the front of the house- 11-12 maybe, and then NEVER alone, at least 2 together . . . I never let mine out alone younger than that."

"Never . . . mine are not allowed outside without a parent until they are around 13. By then they are not outside anyways."

What is there to be so afraid

of? Cafemoms suggest kidnappers, speeding cars, and being judged by their neighbors (oh my!)

However, these claims are largely unjustified or utterly self-filling.

According to the FBI, less than one percent of missing children cases was "involuntary" (aka kidnappings), and that includes the overwhelming number abducted by family members and close acquaintances. Lollipop-wielding perverts snatch remarkably few children from their front yards.

The government's official guidelines suggest that the minimum age for leaving a child alone — for short periods of time only and absolutely never overnight — is 12. Children should also be 15, at the youngest, before they can be trusted to look after a younger brother or sister.

"These are the minimum ages," stresses the state. "Not every child is ready then."

They further define "ready" as "able to understand cause and effect, make independent decisions, and evaluate situations." So, according to the government, until a child is through puberty, they should not be expected to understand that plunging headfirst into traffic could result in a severe case of death.

The assumption of a child's inability to sort things for himself

directly leads to excessive coddling that prevents him from ever acquiring the skills needed to do so in the future.

When left to their own devices, children develop a peculiar society of their own, modeled on that which surrounds them, but self-generated and self-regulated. They learn creative problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiation, self-reliance, teamwork, resourcefulness, how to accept defeat, and how to graciously handle a victory.

And that's not the mention the calories they'll burn, the vitamin D they'll process, the muscles they'll stretch, the blood they'll pump, the immunities they'll build, and the healthy foundation they'll have, both mentally and physically, for the rest of their lives.

A few punches may be thrown. A few tears may be shed. All of your Tupperware may be filled with gleefully acquired crawdads once the galvanized buckets run out. When left alone with their environment, children learn something that can never be acquired from sterilized scraps of complicated electronics: How to be a part of this world they'll inherit.

And if they skin a knee, simply pass on the advice that has developed children's immunities for thousands of years: rub some dirt in it and keep going.