

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Ellen Ruppel Shell is an associate professor of journalism at Boston University, where she codirects the Knight Center for Science and Medical Journalism. Her articles, which often concern public health issues and the politics of medicine, have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, and many other publications. The following passage is adapted from an essay she published in 2000.

IN PRAISE OF BOREDOM

As a child I loved a vacant lot we called "the woods." I went there alone, to read or to wander around. I went there with friends, to build tree forts. Our parents knew none of this, of course, but that was the point. Back then, play went mostly unsupervised, and it was deliciously freeform. Our parents wouldn't have thought of making "play dates" for us, or of cramming our schedules with lessons. After school and on weekends we hung out on the street until another kid showed up. If no one showed up, we bounced a ball off a stoop, or played solitary jacks, or lolled on the grass. If we had roller skates or a bike, we'd use them. If it rained, we roamed around the house, bored. But most of us avoided letting on that we were bored, for fear that our parents would find us something to do, such as scrubbing the kitchen floor or washing the family car. So, unlike many kids today, we took charge of our boredom. According to child development experts, this was probably a good thing.

Last April, Ann O'Bar, president of the American Association on the Child's Right to Play told *The New York Times*: "There's nothing wrong with letting children be bored. Boredom leads to exploration, which leads to creativity." One day last spring I decided to put Ms. O'Bar's theory to the test. My younger daughter Joanna, who's eight, was very, very bored. Her best friend was out of town, none of her other friends was free, and, to heap insult on injury, it was sunny outside. So rather than entertain her, I insisted she find something to do out of doors. I watched from the window, feeling a little guilty as she stomped, sulking, to the play structure in our backyard. She sat on the swing, scowling down at her bare feet (out of defiance, she'd refused to put on shoes). After a few minutes, boredom got the best of her. She had to do something. She twisted and twisted in the swing, then let go, twirling like a dervish. She did this a few more times, throwing her head back to study the cloudless sky. Then she climbed out of the swing and up to the top of the monkey bars, and peered over at the neighbor's parking lot. (We live behind a condominium complex.) She watched a neighbor scrub down his Honda for a while, until she spotted a squirrel. She followed the squirrel up a tree with her eyes, then did a skin-the-cat maneuver down from the monkey bars, back to solid ground. She gathered a bunch of pine cones and sticks, and made a tiny fort for her stuffed armadillo, Jessica. She got the hose and flooded the fort with water. She learned that stuffed armadillos can't swim. She charged into the house for her doctor's bag, then hustled back outside just in time to bring Jessica back to life. I watched all this with one eye, my other trained on the Sunday paper. Gradually my guilt dissolved into pride. Clearly, Ms. O'Bar is on to something.

It seems to me that we've lost trust in our kids. We don't believe that they can navigate the world, so we try to navigate it for them. We muck around in the details of their lives. We load them up with lessons and organized sports overseen by adults; we monitor their every move, demanding to know how and where and with whom they spend their time. And we schedule them so tightly that they lose their natural-born knack for spontaneous play. Put these over-scheduled kids in a room with crayons and markers and scissors and paper and, rather than dig in, they'll ask you what the assignment is. Stick them on a field with a ball, and they'll ask you about the rules. Put them in a room filled with blocks and dolls and trucks and they'll demand a television set or a video game, anything that will organize and structure their time for them.

I'm not sure why this happened, or when, but I am almost certain it has something to do with marketing. Making sure children are endlessly stimulated costs money—money that we are told we must spend if our kids are to be successful, productive adults. We are told that computer games will sharpen their minds, that karate lessons will make them assertive, and that gymnastics classes will teach them “invaluable social skills.” We worry about our children wasting time, missing an opportunity that could, some day, help them get ahead, or even just get by. Most of us know intuitively that children need the opportunity to experiment, to fail. But we are afraid to allow them to do so for fear of their falling behind.

I beg to differ. Half a century ago, Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget identified play as critical to the emotional, moral, and intellectual development of children. Play and the restless questing energy that provokes it is, in a sense, childhood's greatest gift. And the best play is spontaneous and unpredictable. Adults cannot control it; they can only sit back and let it happen. While we may spend hours building an architecturally correct structure, as pictured on the box of an expensive construction set, our children would rather brainstorm and build their own shaky pile of blocks. It is the process of creation, not the product, that naturally interests children, and it is this process that encourages their development as independent thinkers. But it's terribly easy to dampen a child's creativity, especially by insisting that there is a right and wrong way of doing everything. By forcing children to follow rules imposed by others, even during what is supposed to be their leisure time, adults can effectively discourage them from believing that they have anything significant to offer. They can turn them from confident and curious explorers to cautious over-achievers intent on getting it right.

ESSAY TOPIC

According to Shell, what do children miss out on if their parents structure all their time for them? What do you think of her views? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observation and experience.