



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on March 26, 2024

America the Unhappy

Americans — “particularly those under 30 — have become drastically less happy in recent years,” The New York Times reported this week.

Graphs from the latest World Happiness Report — a real thing, put out by Oxford, Gallup and the U.N. — show American kids’ happiness drifting down like a deflated balloon. The surgeon general, already alarmed about the epidemic of loneliness, called for new efforts “to improve real-life social connections for young people.”

In my book, that translates to...

Play.

Really, it is that simple and obvious — yet almost always overlooked. The latest data I saw found that kids play outside on their own under 10 minutes a day.

And yet when kids are playing, they are keenly engaged in “real life social connections.” And generally, their mood improves.

I don’t think I need to prove this point. But I was curious to hear other people’s thoughts about this utterly undervalued activity. Play is losing out to adult-run activities, maybe because it’s free, or because there are no trophies or grades. Or maybe it’s considered more dangerous than sitting at home, with a phone for a friend.

So I asked, all over social media, “What did you get from just playing?”

Some responses:

“Creativity without anxiety.”

“A strong sense of curiosity.”

“About 100 stitches.”

“Teamwork. How to keep secrets. How to make a game fair.”

“Leadership.”

“Initiative.”

“Just organizing a game of something: Spread the word. Who’s coming? Where are we playing? Who’s bringing what? A life lesson in problem solving.”

“Fun without adults controlling the activity.”

“Playing with kids of different ages.”

“Long summer evenings and the smell of mowed grass. Running, collapsing, hiding, pursuing.”

“Exhilaration.”



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“The ability to resolve disputes among ourselves. We knew we wanted to play together in the future, so we made sure to have amicable settlements.”

“Be home by dark and leave a note for where I would be (rough idea).”

“The endless invention of imaginary circumstances.”

“My sister and I were very influenced by the Narnia books and hoped to find a portal to a magic land. I remember a sense of wonder and possibility.”

“Confidence. Joy.”

“Borderline MacGyver-like abilities.”

“Forts. Everywhere.”

“I learned how to, gracefully, fall out of a tree.”

“Spontaneity. Freedom. Laughter and seriousness and everything in between.”

“Outdoor skills.”

“I learned how to walk silently so people wouldn’t know I was sneaking up on them, even in deep leaves.”

“We explored every inch of our land. My dad would ring the bell for us to come to dinner.”

“I became more attached to nature.”

“When I was 7, I made ‘squirrel soup’ in the woods with my 5-year-old brother. We crushed acorns and put them in a metal bowl, added water, stirred and left it for them overnight. The next day we came back to discover the bowl where we had left it. The soup was gone. We were chefs!”

“With my sister we’d pretend to be fish eating cornflakes sprinkled on the bed.”

“How to deal with boredom.”

“A sense of freedom.”

“Great friendships that last to this day.”

Maybe instead of wringing our hands, writing prescriptions or hiring more therapists, we could keep the schools open before and after school for no-phones, old-fashioned free play. (My nonprofit, Let Grow, has a [free guide](#) on how to get that started — and get parent buy-in.) Or parents could try to keep Fridays free for neighborhood play.

In short: We don’t have to raise a miserable generation. What kids get from play is almost everything they need to not feel lonely, bored, helpless and unhappy.

Lenore Skenazy is president of Let Grow, a contributing writer at Reason.com, and author of Has the World Gone Skenazy? To learn more about Lenore Skenazy (Lskenazy@yahoo.com) and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Web page at www.creators.com.

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