



Written by [Lenore Skenazy](#) on August 18, 2023

The Key to Less Lonely Kids

The Surgeon General is right: Loneliness is a massive problem. It's not just sad, it's unhealthy. So, let's look at the quickest, easiest way to solve it, at least among kids.

Get them playing. *Really* playing — organizing games, working through arguments, sometimes yelling, sometimes laughing — without an adult fast-forwarding through all of that.

Playing is the most organic way to make a friend. As my Let Grow co-founder Boston College Psychology Prof. Peter Gray points out: Almost by definition, when you're a kid, a friend is someone you play with.



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But since play has been pretty much replaced by adult-run activities (and homework), we need to literally create a play sanctuary — a time and place where kids of all ages are guaranteed a chance to JUST PLAY.

Otherwise, it won't happen. It's like the way housing developments encroach on the local woods: Pretty soon there's no woods left. The housing developments have money behind them. The trees are just trees.

Similarly, most kid programs have someone running them, so they represent someone's salary and perhaps even a business. That someone, or business, naturally must market their program. So, they do. "This will make your kid smart! Or talented! Or scholarship-eligible!"

The problem is simply that *free play is too free for its own survival*.

What can be done? Just as we have "wildlife preserves," where those in power guarantee that something ancient and precious will not be destroyed, we also need to guarantee kids a "child-life preserve." That is, a time and place when children, no less than gazelles and hippos, can cavort as — dare we say it? — nature intended.

Because when kids play on their own, they're developing all the skills (compromise, communication, collaboration, creativity...) that they need to become successful humans. Less-likely-to-be-lonely humans.

And the byproduct of all that playing is... fun. Fun arises from playing.

But fun isn't what play is really about, developmentally. The pursuit of fun is just what gets kids going. It's *because* play is fun that kids are willing to do all the hard stuff of regulating themselves, planning, rule-making and frustration-tolerating to get to the point where the fun finally happens. Fun is the spoonful of sugar. The "medicine" going down is all the lessons in socialization. It's all the self-control and resourcefulness it takes to make something fun happen... unless an adult is organizing it FOR the kids.

At which point, it's just the sugar.



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What kids need, then, is a place where they can pursue fun and make it happen without adults stepping in. When adults take charge, they skip over the hard, annoying stuff — the squabbling and compromising that the kids would otherwise have to do. That means the kids don't get as much chance to practice the skills of getting along.

So if we want to raise a generation of happy, healthy kids, we can't keep denying them the chance to make their own fun. Free play is the greatest engine for health, joy, connection and learning. That's why all animals do it.

Except, increasingly, us.

Lonely, sad us.

How can you create a "child-life sanctuary" full of play for your kids?

If you're lucky, you live in a place where you can get your neighbors to agree to send their kids out to have fun together. Maybe each afternoon one parent takes a turn sitting outside, like a lifeguard.

If that's not happening, you might see if your school would consider starting a Let Grow Play Club. That's where the school stays open for mixed-age, loose-parts, no-electronics free play before or after school. An adult is present, but they don't organize the games or solve the spats, so the play is as close to "natural" as can be. At LetGrow.org we have a free implementation guide for schools.

Free play may be too free for its own good. But it's also priceless.

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