The importance of free play for kids

By Katie Arnold, Outside

The other morning after breakfast, my 5-year-old daughter whined, “I’m bored!” Few words have the power to rankle parents more than these two (except maybe “When are we gonna be there?”). It was Saturday and the whole day stretched luxuriously before us. We didn’t have to hustle off to school or pack lunches or fly off in four different directions. We could simply hang around and do nothing.

Therein lay the problem.

I told my daughter what my mother had told me when I was a girl: that being bored meant I just hadn’t thought of something clever to do. Boredom reflected poorly on me, not my circumstances. Then I shooed her and her 7-year-old sister out to the arroyo to play.

The arroyo is a dry, sandy wash that runs a few hundred feet below our house. We’ve found piles of rusty tin cans there, traces of a makeshift homeless camp (long abandoned), and other random cast-offs. Mostly, though, it’s wild little corridor between steep hillsides, lined with piñon and juniper trees and bound by sandy cliffs that are perfect for scooting down on your bottom—a narrow slice of nature a few blocks from downtown Santa Fe.

Child development experts call these kinds of spontaneous, child-directed activities “free play.” A generation ago, when kids were far more likely to wander out the door and goof off in the yard or ride bikes with their friends, this didn’t need special terminology. It was just called play. A seminal 1997

study from the University of Michigan determined that the amount of spare time kids in the U.S. had to play dropped by 25 percent since 1981, and Boston University psychologist Peter Gray has found that it has been declining ever since. In a 2007 report, the American Academy of Pediatrics found that "much of parent-child time is spent arranging special activities or transporting children between those activities… Many parents seem to feel as though they are running on a treadmill to keep up yet dare not slow their pace for fear their children will fall behind."

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