

Summer is meant for play

Summer is coming - school will soon be over. Remember what that felt like? Free! I always got that same old feeling every time my kids were out for the summer. It was as if I were out too. My daughter, her friend and mother and I had a traditional lunch at Nonie's every last day of the school year. It was a wonderful day. The whole summer was ahead of us.

My daughter is just about to graduate from college and my son is back to looking forward to summer vacations but from the other side of the desk as a teacher in the South Bronx. My empty nest is here!

No parent understands how quickly childhood passes until it has passed. Those of us on the other side of it offer the advice to cherish every moment while you have it. But we didn't either, because we didn't understand—then. When we're in the midst of raising young children, each day often seems endless and exhausting, and the possibility of life without little ones under foot, demanding our attention, refusing to go to bed and pushing our buttons looks rather appealing. But it's true. It goes by all too fast. And summers go by even faster (especially in New England).

When I think back to those Nonie's lunches and the freedom I so vicariously experienced, I realize how brief is their time as children, and how short is the freedom of summer vacation, especially since it has dwindled to only two months a year. Summers are a precious time and an important time for letting down and relaxing the stresses of the school year. They are an important time for unstructured, child-directed play. All too soon, they won't want to play.

It distresses me to think of the plan for year-round school, which discounts the importance of activities only possible in the summer: swimming, summer camp, catching fireflies, family trips, staying up late, sleeping in, hanging out, hiking a mountain, lying in the grass watching bugs.

Our lives are so structured, planned out and busy now a days that the freedom of those summer months can easily be lost. More and more parents work full-time, and children remain in structured care year round. Time seems to be speeding up. I remember as a child when summers lasted forever. It must have been because we just hung out and played all day long.

We put too little value on children's unstructured, unsupervised play, and fear teenagers hanging out together. We're afraid that children will get hurt, or won't learn enough, and that teens are up to no good.

Childhood is a valuable experience that stays with us as we enter adulthood and beyond. If it has been filled with good play, we are more likely to find ways to play the rest of our lives. If play has been too adult directed and structured, it may not be so valuable to our later experiences.

Thomas Moore has so brilliantly written in *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, "We have little or no trust that a child's knowledge is real knowledge, that their play is important work, or that the animated world they inhabit is as true as the Newtonian world we prefer. We believe firmly that we have to teach them and that we have nothing to learn from them. In an enchanted world, it would make sense to let children do some of the teaching and to give lessons in what they know best—play, animism, and charm, the very things our culture lacks."

For too many of us, our childish sense of wonder and awe was more often squelched than encouraged, our mysteries and fears overprotected, and our fantasies reined in. We were given messages that our laughter, play, spontaneity, and babble were annoying, inconvenient, or burdensome. Our play soon turned to work; our fantasies died with childhood; our spontaneity became organized; our curiosity turned to skepticism.

This summer, find ways as often as possible to unstructure your children's days, to let them discover themselves in spontaneity, to experience the freedom that summer can bring, to leave time for nothing special, to let them do their own thing, and to watch and learn from them. If you must plan, plan for some lazy days of just hanging out. And let them do some of the directing. Trust them to play valuably with each other. Trust that time without adults telling them what to do is important for their development.

And take it from me. Cherish every minute of it. It is gone so soon.