

Give the Gift of Boredom this Summer

"It's peculiar and unnerving in a way to see so many young people walking around with cellphones and ipods in their ears and so wrapped up in media and video games. It robs them of their self-identity. It's a shame to see them so tuned out to real life."

- Bob Dylan quoted in The New York Post

I'm not sure how tuned into "real life" Bob Dylan is, but I found his quote interesting. Is it only our older generation that sees personal technology this way? It does seem that everywhere we go, people are wired in some way, either on portable computers, cellphones or plugged into ipods. Clearly we are far more in touch with information than ever before and can connect with people we rarely, if ever, see. But what are we losing out on?

Fast paced and technologically driven life has become the norm. Kids are used to watching and interacting with fast moving digital connections and images and are spending less and less outdoor playtime—exploring in the woods, hanging out, making up games with friends and being bored. So rarely are any of us without something technological to hook into, that being bored has become a gift we need to give our children. The problem is, they won't see it that way. Playing outside and making up games seems lame to many of them.

I remember sitting on my next-door neighbor's porch for what seemed like hours on end identifying each car as it went by (of course they all looked different then). We created a circus on the swing set and sent invitations to all the neighbors. We'd spend hours up at the neighborhood park. Kids were out all day and went home for supper.

And then there was sandlot baseball—completely kid run, no adult supervision. Kids conflicted over the rules and difficulties with team interaction and scoring. So in order to play the game they loved, they worked it out, resolved problems, created rules, and made decisions on their own. This is how it worked.

Nowadays, adults supervise everything and children don't have the chance to create their own rules of play. We have somehow lost our trust in their abilities, taken on their problems as our own, and thus their natural abilities have diminished. Then as our

children get older, we complain that they don't take responsibility for anything and think only of themselves. Hmmm, wonder how that came about.

Later many graduate from high school or college and flounder in the world of jobs and independent living. Of course the economy doesn't help now but this has been such a problem that many books have been written on this "lost" generation. What's happened? I think one contributing factor is a lack of boredom.

So as you are making summer plans for your children, don't feel bad if you can't afford that summer camp, music lessons or the trip out west. Don't worry if your children aren't "keeping up with the Joneses". And especially don't feel guilty if they come to you and say, "I'm bored." Empathize with them, make some suggestions, but inside say, "YES!" to yourself, "I'm giving a gift!" Being bored means dealing with creating something. I remember making a list with my son of all the things he might do when he got bored. So when I heard the complaint, I'd say, "Check your list." And he would. And so what if everything on the list seems, "stupid". That means they'll have to come up with something new.

Make time in your schedule for walks in the woods. Make a list of things to look and listen for, and then have your kids check them off as they are discovered. Go for evening walks and admire the sunset. Ask how many different colors they can see. Build a bird house teaching the use of some basic tools and watch for inhabitants. Get a new pet and ask your child to learn it's personality and translate it's sounds so he can report to the rest of the family. Teach your children to knit or sew and start a project. Do a puzzle with the whole family. I wonder how many lemonade stands we'll see this summer. Will they be left to the girls while the boys are inside playing video games?

Technology is a wonderful thing. Even video games can be interactive and educational. Play them with your kids. Computers are the way of the world and ipods bring us more music than we ever dreamed of. But the natural world, the "real world", is getting ignored. It's what is always there. It doesn't have to be plugged in or turned on. When we're bored, we can take it in. When we're plugged in, we can't.

As Dylan points out, one's self-identity becomes defined by the choices we make in our lives; how we want to interact and experience life. Being plugged in over 50% of the time strongly alters that self-identity. Our work often necessitates being plugged in. All the more reason to spend down time being a bit bored. We cannot take technology away but let's give our children a chance to appropriately evaluate the choices they make throughout life. Let's give them a foundation of being in touch with what is real so that tech time is an adjunct not a replacement. Being bored is often when inspiration comes.