

Kids need dirt, bananas need love

By Jon Carroll | October 20, 2015



Photo: Connor Radnowich, The Chronicle



Ryan Hernandez, 4, crawls through a tunnel on the playground at the San Francisco Zoo in September 2015.

I was glad to read, via Lizzie Johnson's story in this very newspaper, that San Francisco is building an unsafe playground. Well, not unsafe, but less safe. More challenging. More capable of yielding adventure. More chaotic, which is to say: more like childhood itself.

Apparently, park and playground people have realized that their play areas have become so blanded out that only the most generic kinds of fun are available. Up goes the swing, down goes the swing. These monkey bars are great, but my feet touch the ground. Oh, up the ladder and down the slide, and that's pretty much it for the architecturally interesting play structure.

I've been grumpy about helicopter parenting for many years now, but I haven't wanted to complain, because my generation got a few things wrong, like smoking (OK) and seat belts (not necessary). I remember tooling around Berkeley in my 1974 Plymouth station wagon, puffing on Kents while my daughters played in the wayback.

And yet we are all alive. What are the odds?

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OCTOBER 20, 2015 / PAGE 2 OF 2

My childhood was filled with suburban adventures. There were many unfenced vacant lots, with many interesting things — sharp metal objects, pieces of glass — buried in the dirt. Also, as I understand it, construction sites are no longer considered weekend fun zones for 8-year-olds.

But then the pendulum swung the other way, and suddenly strollers were better armed than Bradley Fighting Vehicles. Kids wore helmets while tricycling. (And yes, please, I know that there are kids who need helmets. But many don't, except in fevered imaginations.) Our dear little id-bundles were over-scheduled with lessons of all kinds, thus reducing the amount of precious time they had to kill flies or read prohibited literature.

How can you construct a device to hurl potatoes at authority figures if you always have to be at karate class?

Childhood is a time for working things out. I am not in favor of children driving, getting married or joining the Air Force, but there are lot of things they should be able to do — even if there is risk involved. Because risk is a part of life. If you can't manage risk, you can't manage life.

I don't mean really risky risks. A slightly more challenging playground is not a death trap. A hike in the mountains with nothing more than three fig bars and a bottle of water — also OK. Sure, maybe a lightning storm pops up and you're all reduced to ash, but probably not.

And Neosporin need not be on hand at all times. I know, heresy.

So I'm for more careless behavior and unstructured free time. I'm for playing stupid games even if they involve climbing trees or throwing rocks at squirrels. I'm for street food and amazingly large collections of Batman ephemera.

Soon enough these kids will have to kowtow to authority and slot themselves someplace into the voracious economy. Give 'em a few years of delight.