

What happened to pickup games?

More and more as I look past my window and across the road to the school field beyond, filled with children of various heights and sizes, all geared up in gears, I wonder: Is it childhood playing? Is it the children engaging in plays and games as we did in years past, or is it still us, now playing them, our children, instead of ourselves, with the stakes raised higher and higher matching our own aspirations and unfulfilled dreams.

We watch them as referees, goalies and cheerleaders, in our minds having them hit the ball as we would like it hit. In our minds, we promote them to unimaginable heights, forgetting that they need a ladder with many steps. We cheer their successes at hitting a ball as if it were the world cup. We berate them for missing it as if it were the end of the line. We tempt them, cajole them with rewards to do better and better and better. And all this, at sports!

Could we not just let them be? Could we not just let them live their childhood, enjoy its simplicities, its pleasures, its leisureliness? Let them make precious moments of it before time snatches it away? And before we hasten its speed with game after game after game, in one field after another, in one arena after another, all their moments of childhood flashing together into a series of sports events? Could we not just let them be?

Don't we all have memories of childhood that we cherish? Don't we all remember, running to fields, parks, friends' homes and backyards? Don't we remember building tents and homes under trees, under bushes, under snow banks? Don't we remember just being at home with our family and playing, helping, doing nothing? Don't we remember just being? And if not, don't we all remember wanting to just be?

Today, when we watch some of our famed athletes speak, we want to hold our head in our hands, embarrassed at their mental and oratorical abilities. For some of us, we would in fact prefer not to have our children listen to their precious baseball card heroes, if we can help it. I'm sure they're not all the same. I'm sure that for some, the sport is probably their one special gift, culmination of an ability, and for some, a hard and challenging destination.

Yet, in general, what can we expect of our children as adults, if we raise them fitted into slot after slot of our calendar to play sports? Where is the time for anything else? Studies and reports show that many children burn out physically, exhausted by the time they reach their teens, many of the sports getting competitive and rough at an early age. No wonder some children begin to develop physical problems! And what about the effect of all this on their mental development?

Maybe, it's time we remembered to let our kids be just kids, playing with neighborhood kids in pickup games for complete, unadulterated enjoyment filled with laughter. Maybe, instead of standing on the other side of the fence, we could join them, out there on the ball-field or on the ice.

And, I know, that many of us do just that. And, I also know that many of us worry, that if we don't keep our kids occupied, they might fall into bad things; into drugs and bad company. But then, is the solution to fill up all their time and all our time running from one activity to another? Could it be that if the kids did have that leisurely time and also did have us, they might feel content, confident and happy enough to resist and say no to the things that we fear for them? Could it be that if we knew their friends and their friends' families and them, us, we would all feel much safer and more relaxed,

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and enjoy life with our families just that little bit more? Maybe its time we all just picked up.

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