

Until THE Streetlights Come On

HOW A RETURN TO PLAY BRIGHTENS
OUR PRESENT AND PREPARES KIDS
FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE



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FOUNDER OF 1000 HOURS OUTSIDE

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Introduction

I wanted to take him back.

It was just for a moment as I sat in dark chaos, or maybe in a bathtub full of bubbles.

I'm acutely aware I'm not supposed to write this. I wasn't even supposed to think it, but there I was, the thoughts racing through my mind. I couldn't do it. The crying, the spit-up, and the diaper changes weren't the issue. I think it was the constant requirement of my full self for an uncountable number of days ahead.

I thought about how odd it all was. I'd done extensive training to dress up in the mouse costume at Chuck E. Cheese. Entry into clubs and jobs and educational opportunities required me to prove myself in some way, and yet every day across the world, mothers and fathers are sent home with babies, and they've had to jump through no hoops. They've had to pass no tests. It is the largest responsibility with the least number of requirements that we ever encounter.

I wasn't qualified. Didn't they know? Couldn't they tell? I didn't have the grit, the knowledge, the knack, the stamina, or the mental fortitude. It doesn't matter—here's your baby.

Out of desperation, I called my friend Samantha. She had done this before. Twice. She told me, “It will be easier in six weeks.” I assured her I wouldn’t survive that long.

So I pondered returning him. But where? To the hospital? People return things all the time, don’t they? I’ve seen people with opened bags of chicken wings and even used mattresses standing in the return line at Costco. There they are happily greeted by someone in a red vest who all too casually snatches their returns and asks zero questions beyond if they’d like cash back or for the refund to be put back on their credit card.

This thought of returning him was the briefest of thoughts, flying in and out of my mind like the frantic bat that once flew into our home, causing some havoc and screaming, only to quickly return to the night sky from whence it came.

The brief thought turned into a dream in which I announced to my family that I had returned our first baby. They were livid. Incredulous. But what could I do? It had nothing to do with his worthiness but solely pointed to my own flaws and shortcomings. I told them I just didn’t have it in me. The well of strength I needed wasn’t deep enough.

That dream helped me sort through the gaping ineptitude I felt.

Parenthood digs down deep to the bottom of the basket, roots around, and firmly grabs hold of all your failures that you’d conveniently tucked away, then yanks them out and puts them on full display. Ta-da!

But after sloughing through three years of parenthood, I happened upon a secret. An answer. Hope. Throughout the persistent and often rapid changes in child development, this secret miraculously continues to work more than a decade after our family started using it.

It’s a simple answer, though not necessarily an easy one. There is a difference.

This answer covers many of the modern parenting problems we face, from exhaustion to anxiety to depression to relentless pressure to overwhelm to fear to screen usage to the deep desire we have to connect with our families. It provides so many of the things we are looking for right now. We don't have to wait until tomorrow or next week for the benefits. This single solution releases the dam, and the answers come flooding in.

Relief. Joy. Connection. Respite. Delight. Preparation for an uncertain future.

They can all be found in one place, in one word: *play*.

Play? Like a board game?

Sure. But play encompasses so much more. Scratching the surface, it includes fiddling and tinkering, romps on the carpet, fast-paced chasing games, fantasy worlds that are carefully created and enhanced over many years, and towers of blocks. Play is those times you catch a child fully immersed in a world of his own, but what he is doing is odd by every standard of adult measurement. It has become foreign to you at your age. You wouldn't do it. But the handful of dirt he spreads across his legs and then brushes off with a stick, all on a repeating loop, is play. Strange as it all may seem, it remains a worthy use of time.

I meet moms all over the country who come up to me, tears streaming down their faces, expressing gratitude for the freedom they've found in the 1000 Hours Outside movement I coined and started in 2013. I've also met anxious grandmothers who share, often in hushed tones but with a sense of immediacy, how desperately their grandchildren need this.

Where did play go? How has childhood changed so rapidly? How did it transform into an unrecognizable entity? So many things are the same: the cereal bowls, the stories, the bath-time giggles. But so many are different: the lengthened

school days, the homework that has spread its tentacles into earlier grades, the immersive video game environments, the cell phone apps, the sheer number of extracurricular opportunities. How did we get here, and what parts of these cultural changes should we embrace? Our understanding of the present—and even of the future—begins in the past.

Play connects us to all those who have gone before us, to humanity itself.

Today, in this present moment, as you read these words while the water for the macaroni and cheese boils over (that wooden spoon trick has never worked for me), and while tiny fingers grab at your pants leg, and while hopeful little eyes connect with your tired ones, play is also here to help you in the present. In the right now. In the desperation.

And wouldn't you know, while you are laying a deep foundation for your children that reaches back through all of time, and while you are allowing some of that pressure and anxiety of today's mountains to lift and rise, floating off like the clouds, you are also doing the very best thing to help your kids prepare for an uncertain future. There is nothing better than what many would consider old-fashioned play to prepare today's youth for the unknowns of tomorrow.

It is predicted that by 2030, 85 percent of the jobs that will be available haven't even been created yet. An example is swarm robots. They are exactly what they sound like—a group of fully autonomous robots that move in to accomplish tasks that used to employ people. Swarm robots are not just on their way; they are here and already being used in search and rescue, supply chain management, agriculture, and military reconnaissance.¹ Someday soon, they may be headed your way to paint the exterior of your home. Children who have been bathed in ample amounts of unstructured and semi-structured play will be equipped with the inner

resources needed to navigate and handle the rapid technological changes that will accompany their futures.

In generations gone by, kids used to play until the streetlights came on. How many times have you heard that phrase about playing outside until it got dark?

And yet, somewhere along the line, we passed play off as frivolous. We looked around us and started biting our fingernails, nervous about what we might be missing. The neighborhood kids were taking French horn lessons and a foreign language, practicing ballet and baseball, and running for student government. It would be irresponsible to leave our dinner dishes in the sink and toss a baseball around until the fireflies emerge and the streetlights come on, wouldn't it? Aren't there so many more worthwhile uses of our time? Those spelling words and multiplication tables aren't going to memorize themselves.

But what if there was a way to have it all—a connection to the past with a full and lively present that simultaneously prepares kids for the future?

The pages ahead will offer help and hope, giving you foundational life principles to come back to time and time again, even as the world around us continues to change.

You *can* slow down. You *can* enjoy today. You *can* be present. And just as important, you *can* feel confident in knowing that extended periods of play are doing wonders for your child and your family. The wave of relief you've been hoping for is here. The answers you've been grasping for lie in the pages ahead.

So let's dive in and explore the benefits of play. Let's discover how we can do less and still gain more. Let's reclaim childhood and parenthood all at the same time. It doesn't have to be as hard as we make it. We can do this together, and we can create lasting change for generations to come.

one

A Great Divide

The Widening Chasm between Virtual and Real

Welcome to the future, which begins in the past.

Jerry Kaplan

For three years I felt like an abysmal failure. Each day came and went, and throughout all the minutes and the hours I was drowning in the needs of young children. No one really knew. Drowning often happens silently, you know.

Other moms seemed to gracefully transition into their new roles like classically trained ballerinas. I joined in the fun with three left feet. I never managed to get the infant schedules to work or the meal plans mastered. I tried all the things—mommy-and-me programs, sensory bins, exersaucers, Play-Doh, cartoons, “new” toys from mom-to-mom sales, sand tables, water tables, and train tables. So many tables. I tried making snacks that looked like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. I made muffin-tin lunches.

It didn't matter whether I had one, two, or three kids—I couldn't keep up with the relentless onslaught of needs that accompanied the sweetest little beings I'd ever known.

I wasn't good at this. Period.

When our oldest son turned eighteen months old, I started weekly letter activities with him. In retrospect, I have no idea why I did this. What propelled me to think, *Now is the time?* He was one and a half, we also had a newborn, and yet I had Pinterest boards filled with letter-of-the-week activities. It was like some imaginary shotgun fired in my mind, signaling the start of a race. *Go! Now! Letter A!*

For some unknown reason, I decided to share our letter adventures with friends, family, and people who barely knew me via social media. In the deep recesses of my Facebook feed lies a photo of an apple tree made from green construction paper, a paper plate, and a paper towel tube. I built it. And our one-year-old added a few apple stickers to the greenery. A picture of our (my?) masterpiece can still be found in the “A week” photo album, which I created a mere three months after my son learned how to walk. It's a wonder I had any friends at all.

What It's Really Like

When the doctor hands you your baby, they also hand you the weight of the world. You're sent home and left to grapple with how to fill the time that looms ahead of you, how to keep your own blood pressure in check while you're surrounded by cries of discontentment, and how to live well without a wink of sleep—all while trying to slow down the hands of the clock because the minutes are rapidly ticking away.

The pressure is on to prepare your child for college. That starts early, you know. The neighbor kids can already count

to three hundred, play the cello—oh, and did I mention they're bilingual? My homemade apple tree arts and crafts projects weren't going to cut it. Or at least that's how I felt. Maybe that's why I started them so early, to cover up for perceived incompetence.

In those early days, an easy answer surfaced: *Dora the Explorer*. Dora seemed to solve all the problems, giving me a chance to actually catch my breath and to fill a small portion of the minutes of our day. Besides, our kids were learning Spanish. They could say, "¡Vámanos!"

There was only one snag—the show was the shortest twenty-two minutes I'd ever experienced. I'd entered some sort of time warp. How on earth could over a third of an hour evaporate so quickly?

During those days, Dora was the perfect answer—until she wasn't. I learned her magic worked only during the twenty-two minutes she was on, and then the memory of her wreaked havoc on the rest of our day. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth when I turned her off. Adding one cartoon to our day caused the remainder of our day (and many more days that followed) to be filled with requests for more and for other cartoons. I found myself, in those fleeting twenty-two minutes, scrambling and stressing or zoning out and getting nothing done at all. Dora wasn't the perfect answer; she wasn't the answer at all.

All throughout those early years of motherhood, I'd stumble to the bathroom at the end of most days with time only to brush my teeth before falling into bed, emptied and depleted. I remember looking at myself in the mirror one day, thinking this was not how I'd imagined my life. The frazzled, haggard, and sometimes depressed places I found myself in were not part of the plan. I desperately wanted to enjoy my time with my kids. Instead, I was living in

a state of complete overwhelm, questioning all my daily decisions.

One afternoon, on an almost-fall Michigan day, my friend Angela asked us to go on an outside excursion with her and her kids for four hours. It was a seemingly innocuous request. She was trying something new. She'd been influenced by British educator and reformer Charlotte Mason, who recommended kids be outside for four to six hours a day whenever the weather was tolerable. Angela asked if we could bring a picnic lunch and meet them at a local park from nine in the morning until one in the afternoon.

I told her we were in, but I was skeptical. To be completely honest, I was slightly terrified. Every activity I set before my children lasted half the time it took to prepare, at best, so you can imagine how I thought the outing would go. *Four hours of misery coming right up*, I thought. What were our kids possibly going to do for all that time without a train table, a sand table, action figures, Play-Doh, and a cartoon episode at the ready? How would we manage this stripped-down excursion where we just simply went outside?

The next morning, I packed lunches and snacks, tracked down stray shoes, and soothed toddler outbursts, and we hustled out the door. Angela picked out a spot at the park, and we each spread our picnic blankets on the sun-drenched grass. Sorely in need of some adult connection, we sat close together, holding our infants. We had one of those friendships forged by struggling through new stages of life together—mothers in the trenches. At the time, we each had babies who were completely content to be held amid the gorgeous surroundings of a simple day in nature. We caught up on life, and the babies alternated between nursing, sleeping, and observing the subtleties of nature that vied for their attention.

We each had two older kids as well, toddlers and preschoolers. What did the older kids do during that time, you might wonder? To my utter surprise, they played for the entirety of those 240 minutes. Without the daily onslaught of things I threw at them in my failed attempts for a little peace and quiet, they played with the materials Mother Nature had expertly crafted for them. They reached into the depths of themselves and pulled out their imaginations.

Nature play wasn't just good for my kids that day. Oh no. For the first time in three years, I was able to enjoy some mid-day adult conversation, with a melodious backdrop of birds singing and trees rustling. The sun felt warm on my skin. I inhaled deeply, feeling the weight I'd carried on my shoulders begin to dissipate.

After three grueling years, this was the first good day I'd had as a mom.

I won't ever forget the intricacies of the setting. What I would learn over the coming years is that almost every outdoor event stuck with me, memorialized in my mind whether I'd taken a slew of pictures or not. There's something about the types of experiences that engage all the senses, the ones that pull us out of our daily routine. They stick, like the sticky foot pads of tree frogs, which are partially made of snot—a good thing to know if one happens to jump onto your arm as you traipse through the woods.

There was a vast difference between how I expected this little outing to go and how it actually went in real time. I had braced for it to go completely off the rails. What I expected to be an abysmal flop turned out to be a catalyst for transformative changes in our lives. On that day, I was simply in awe.

Our kids fell asleep in the car on the drive home. I was noticeably more relaxed and refreshed. I felt happy and fulfilled.

I'd watched my kids play that day, wondering, *Why didn't we do this sooner?* Though we had spent time outside, it was always a leftover thing, thrown into our day between library visits, gymnastics classes, and shuffling kids to and from playdates. Going outside was an afterthought in our overscheduled days. That day at the park with our friends was purposely built around playing outside in nature, and it felt entirely different.

After that day, I canceled most of the programs our kids were involved in and started to meet outside with a few other families two or three times a week. We built those days around Charlotte Mason's recommendation as best we could, looking ahead at the weather for the most "tolerable" days.

What I quickly learned is that I had been searching for the answers I needed in all the wrong places. Nature and empty space set aside for playing became my saving grace—they offered a solution to the overwhelm, overstimulation, and guilt that clouded my life. To go from barely surviving to thriving in most facets of life usually takes considerable time and effort, but sustainable change happened for myself and our kids with just one simple shift: prioritizing play.

Little did I know it at the time, but these experiences would lay the foundation for the 1000 Hours Outside movement I'd start just two years later—a movement to inspire families to bring balance between nature time and screen time back to childhood (and even adulthood).

We tend to think we need more: more entertainment, more materials, more planning, more discipline around technology, more things to buy to keep our kids and ourselves happy, content, and competent. But nature is all around us, offering respite from our demanding schedules and overstimulated minds. Though the power of nature is always

available to us, many of us don't know that we can deeply trust its offerings or bask in its care. We tend to discount nature play as a tried-and-true remedy for our anxious, over-scheduled lives. We have trouble believing that simple play could be pivotal in preparing our kids for a complex future and helping us enjoy happier, more connected relationships as families today.

With all the progress that's being made to improve our lives, how have we missed this truth? Why are we moving farther away from a life of slowness and careening ever more quickly to as much and as fast as possible?

A Small Glimpse of What Has Changed

There are very few of us with life circumstances that have allowed us a front-row seat to generational changes. Many of us feel the shift, like tectonic plates that spread, slip, and collide in the earth's lithosphere, but it's hard to put a finger on exactly what is going on.

When I was a child, I roamed the neighborhood with my siblings and friends in the afternoons, on the weekends, and in the summer. We were unaccompanied and untracked by GPS devices—a situation that is rather unheard of these days, as is evidenced by Mike Lanza's book *Playborhood*. Lanza advocates turning the neighborhood where you live into a place for play. You know, kind of how things used to be.

But we weren't privy to the adult conversations and conventions of wisdom at the time, so when the cultural landscape shifted, it was hard to know why. Were the shoo-out-the-door parents misinformed? Were they blissfully ignorant of what it takes to prepare a child for future adulthood? Were they negligent, blatantly ignoring the risks that lay beyond their doorsteps?

Think back to your own childhood years. What stands out? What were the moments that made you feel most alive? What are some of your favorite memories from decades past?

The ordinary, unglamorous moments of childhood—an afternoon on a rope swing, snowball fights, and feeling the prickly grass underfoot—no longer dot the landscape of childhood. They’ve all but vanished, even though for so many of us who grew up before screens were so dominant, these memories still conjure up feelings of peace and satisfaction decades later, pointing to a unique power in simple moments.

We’re raising children in a world bursting with technology that is in large ways shaped by corporations that spend every waking moment trying to facilitate their definition of “connection.” We live in a time when fear of the future pushes us to fill every bit of blank calendar space. Are daisy chains and childhood games like Red Rover obsolete, relegated to live only in our memories? Or should these simple things still hold a place in our everyday lives? Who ultimately holds the answers to those questions?

I don’t know the ins and outs of all the changes, but I do know that by the time I became a parent, I was consumed with looking for enrichment opportunities in the form of courses and classes. The local Parks and Recreation department sent me brochures every season, the libraries were running programs, and when I looked around me, that’s what everyone else seemed to be doing too.

There are always changes that coincide with generations. Dr. Jean Twenge, an American psychologist who specializes in generational differences, notes in her book *iGen* that certain changes carry positive consequences while others carry negative consequences, and still others are neutral in their impact.

So, what of this onslaught of pressure to transform childhood into an adult training ground? It swept in through the back door and locked the front door. You're only allowed out through the garage to get in the minivan and head off to soccer practice, then dance, then violin practice. Is this busyness, this filling of the days, one of those changes that is positive? Is it leading to more fulfillment and greater life satisfaction? Is it neutral, having no bearing on anything at all? Or are there some negative consequences that have attached, like the burrs that stick to your pants on a walk through the woods?

Psychotherapist and school counselor Thomas Kersting joined my podcast, *The 1000 Hours Outside Podcast*, on episode 13 to discuss his book *Disconnected: How to Protect Your Kids from the Harmful Effects of Device Dependency*. Kersting is one of those individuals who, due to his line of work, has been able to personally observe generational changes. In 2008, he worked with a teen who was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Up until that point, the average age of ADHD diagnosis was eight. In his job at a public high school, Kersting had never before worked with someone who had received a diagnosis as a teen. Kersting put it this way: "After that meeting and for the rest of that school year, literally every single request was for a teenager that had been diagnosed with ADHD. That got my wheels spinning."¹

Angela Hanscom, pediatric occupational therapist, author of *Balanced and Barefoot*, and founder of TimberNook, which focuses on nature-centered developmental programming in New England, shares her own eye-opening path of generational changes. She saw waiting lists for childhood occupational therapy services continue to grow until they were sometimes up to a year long. I've spoken with Angela

on several occasions, both on my podcast and during other small online events we have done together, and she often brings up the huge caseloads that pediatric occupational therapists carry.

When Angela speaks with crowds, she frequently asks them to think about how much outdoor play they got as children and figure out an approximate number of hours. “The typical response I get is about four to five hours of outdoor play,” she says.² My experience as a child growing up in the 1980s and 1990s included hours of outside experiences most days of the week. I had a mile walk to school and back. My elementary school had three recesses a day that lasted somewhere between forty-five minutes to an hour each. And I spent countless afternoons and evenings playing catch in our front yard or riding my bike around the block.

The amount of time kids spend outside is one of those generational shifts from which pediatric occupational therapists are seeing the downstream effects. This is not one of those neutral generational changes. Angela says, “A half an hour a week is not enough for the children to be able to regulate themselves and be able to strengthen their muscles. Kids were starting to be more and more clumsy, falling out of their chairs at school, running into each other, running into the walls, even falling off playground equipment.”³

Still another change that Ivy League-educated psychologist Dr. Nicholas Kardaras noticed is that some of the young children he was working with had lost the ability to play with blocks. With a number of blocks placed in front of them, these children had somehow lost that internal drive to stack, to build, and to knock down. Their curiosity had been “hijacked,” as Kardaras put it.⁴

American writer, psychologist, and ventriloquist Dr. Susan Linn (you may have seen her on *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*)

has noticed a similar trend. She states, “I can no longer assume that children know how to play creatively.”⁵

Beyond the capacity to play, Kardaras also mentioned some other alarming trends in his book *Glow Kids*, such as a study out of the University of Tübingen that showed how over a twenty-year period we have lost 1 percent of our sensory awareness every year. He said, “15 years ago people could distinguish 300,000 sounds; today many children can’t go past 100,000. Twenty years ago the average subject could detect 250 different shades of a particular color. Today the number is 130.”⁶

Beyond the dulling of the senses, Kardaras points to a study done in 2000 (years before the release of the iPhone) that “children between the ages of 10 and 17 will experience nearly one-third fewer face-to-face interactions with other people throughout their lifetimes as a result of their increasingly electronic culture, at home and in school.”⁷ Cal Newport, in his book *Digital Minimalism*, warns us, “We should treat with great care any new technology that threatens to disrupt the ways in which we connect and communicate with others. When you mess with something so central to the success of our species, it’s easy to create problems.” He continues, “Our sociality is simply too complex to be outsourced to a social network or recued to instant messages and emojis.”⁸

Kardaras echoes Kersting when he cites an 800 percent increase in ADHD in the last three decades, and he uses the phrase “stimulation dependence” in describing many of today’s youth.⁹ We live in what has been coined an “attention economy,” where companies are massively profiting off how much of our time and attention they can commandeer.

I think one reason why grandmothers flock to our 1000 Hours Outside booth when I speak at conferences is because

they too have been front-row spectators of these generational changes. Of course, there are many positives to the technologies we all enjoy, and there are legitimate necessities that require the use of technology for health, safety, and more. It's not this part that concerns the grandparents. It's the imbalance that has arisen since they were parents that has them concerned—both for their grandkids, who they don't see playing, and for their own children, who have morphed into parents bubbling over with stress. The grandmas are searching for answers they can share with their grown children who now have children of their own. Often the premise of *1000 Hours Outside* is just what they are looking for.

I love talking with people from older generations and hearing about their childhoods. It's interesting to compare then versus now. A host at a campground my family was staying at a few summers back had grown up in the 1940s and spoke of getting off the school bus at the end of the school year, immediately taking off his shoes, running home barefoot, and not putting another pair of shoes on again until a new school year started in the fall.

I've talked with many who grew up in a similar time as that camp host who speak of how it was the norm to shield children from adult-centered topics. It was common to turn off radio programs or stop conversations when children came in the room because whatever was being discussed was deemed inappropriate for the ears of young people. And yet, these same kids often had free range in their neighborhoods and towns. The concern for emotional safety superseded that of physical safety.

Today we find ourselves in the reverse trend. The author of *Simplicity Parenting* and a number of other influential books, Kim John Payne speaks on how “too much, too soon” has

become normalized in today's childhood.¹⁰ We don't let our kids out of our sight, but we hand them the entire world of the internet at the average age of ten and four months.¹¹ "Too much, too soon" as it pertained to information was not the typical experience in generations prior. Yet these same kids played for hours outdoors without supervision, and the tales they tell often leave us with gaping mouths.

Dr. Peter Gray ends his book *Free to Learn* with a story that today would seem shocking, and he also spoke about it on my podcast. He and his wife gave their son permission to travel alone from America to Europe for two weeks in the 1980s. His son, spurred on by an interest in Dungeons and Dragons, wanted to see in person some of the places he had learned about. He brought the proposal to his parents, telling them that he would work a summer job and earn all the money needed. He would also research the ticket purchase and lodging accommodations. All he needed from them was a ride to and from the airport because . . . he was only thirteen years old. With no cell phones or GPS tracking, the Gray parents had to be satisfied with just a few short collect-call conversations over the course of a two-week period before their son made his way back home.¹²

Today the parenting norms often ban tree climbing, games of tag, and walking through the neighborhood to a friend's house, yet on the flip side we are handing kids full access to the internet at younger ages. As I write this, the average age of cell phone ownership is ten. These powerful devices, which weren't originally intended to wield so much power, have entered elementary schools. The iPhone was supposed to be a marriage of a phone and the iPod digital music player. Today a phone can track every location we've ever been to, and it is a stand-in for our camera, computer, flashlight, GPS, calculator . . . and it can work as a level.

Those born after the year 2000, also known as “digital natives,” can hardly even comprehend life without constant connection. Of course, we are concerned with computer literacy as well as literacy in the more traditional sense. But have these cultural forces, invisible to most of us, pushed us in a better direction, or are they upending the quality of our current and future lives?

The History of Our Screens

The inventor of the very first screen, the television, was a farm boy named Philo Taylor Farnsworth, who lived a majority of his childhood without any electricity. In 1927, at the age of twenty-one, Farnsworth figured out how to manipulate electrons, line upon line, in such rapid succession that the human eye would see all of them as one picture.

Interestingly, many technology moguls following Farnsworth tout similar childhoods—ones completely devoid of the very mechanisms they went on to invent, refine, and ultimately massively profit from. Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple, didn’t set eyes on a computer until he was twelve years old. Microsoft founder Bill Gates had a childhood filled with hands-on living as a Boy Scout. He carved things out of wood, wove baskets, and even completed a fifty-mile hike while wearing a forty-two-pound backpack. Interestingly, many of those same tech moguls and executives went on to raise their children mostly tech-free or, at the very least, severely limited tech’s influence in their children’s lives.

The twenty years after Farnsworth first lined up all those electrons would come and go with very few American families owning a television—just eight thousand homes had them in 1946. Poll numbers from this time period indicate most Americans didn’t even know what a television was.

What happened next can be likened to an explosion. Within a decade, the number of households with televisions would grow from the thousands to the millions. In the 1960s, there were fewer than thirty hours of programming for children available each week, mainly confined to Saturday mornings. By the 1980s, the television was blaring for more than fifty hours a week in the average American household, and by 2000, 98 percent of homes all across the United States had at least one television.¹³ We've been engulfed—in a span of sixty years (just over two generations), we've gone from twenty-seven hours of children's programming available each week to five hundred hours of video content uploaded to YouTube every single minute.

We are drawn to screens in part because our brains are wired for novelty. We're built to seek out the new and unexpected, but historically there were large swaths of time where screens did not provide what we sought. The cartoons were over for the day, and the path ahead was clear: we'd have to find something else to do.

Today, that draw of the glowing screens is always lurking. And it's not just network television we're dealing with—we've added on computer monitors, video game systems, virtual reality headsets, tablets, smartphones, and smartwatches. We're up against a lot.

Beyond the devices themselves are the most brilliant minds that have designed screens in ways that capture our attention and turn our time into a commodity to be sold. Test subjects are hooked up to electrodes during initial phases of a game design, and gaming companies hire neuroscientists and neurobiologists to look for the subjects' blood pressure to spike to about 180 over 120 within the first few minutes of playing. Maximum arousal is the goal, which can lead to addictive behaviors.

We've been enrolled in a competition for our own attention and that of our children—and yet it's a competition we didn't sign up for. It's also one without fair rules and is lacking a lot of transparency. How is one household supposed to win against giant technology companies?

We can clearly see the results of this unfair game. Both kids and adults have become stimulation dependent. It's no wonder we're hooked on screens—they're working the way they're meant to.

Gearing Up for an Unknown Future

In a rapidly changing world, getting our kids ready for what is to come often feels like an insurmountable task. The jobs of tomorrow won't mirror the jobs of today, and neither will the skill sets needed. Automation, algorithms, and artificial intelligence are changing the landscape of the job market. Winifred Gallagher, author of *New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change*, puts it this way: "Our children will work in industries that don't even exist now, doing jobs that we don't yet have the vocabulary to describe."¹⁴ Can kids still have a childhood that includes basking in the sun and playing on tire swings? Or will that leave them ill-prepared for job titles like cyber calamity forecaster and human machine teaming manager?

To find some of our answers, we must look backward in order to look forward. What prepared Steve Jobs and Bill Gates for their transformative technology roles? Was it the technology itself, or was it the stark opposite? The fact that they were both born in 1955, more than twenty years before the home computers entered the marketplace, gives us our answer. Steve Jobs didn't use a computer at all until age twelve, and Bill Gates was thirteen before he used one for

the first time.¹⁵ Do we prepare our kids for a future that's inextricably linked to technology while still allowing them to be kids and partake in the hands-on moments of today? Can a childhood that is filled with kittens, scooters, kite flying, and drippy summer popsicles even remotely equip children for what lies ahead?

We've got one shot at this. The question looms, encircling our minds: Are we doing this right?

To be prepared for a job market that spits out changes at increasingly faster rates, our children need to be innovative, adaptive, imaginative, opportunistic, and resilient. The path to those skills does not lie in a virtual realm where kids are passive participants in two-dimensional worlds that have been preprogrammed by adults and artificial intelligence. The qualities we want to impart to our children are cultivated through self-directed play and hands-on experiences.

What a tricky predicament. Screens are, on some level, providing for our all-consuming needs. The thought of limiting or abandoning them is sometimes too much to even consider. And yet, according to a report released by the University of Michigan about how children use their time, on average, kids play outside four to seven minutes a day but use screened devices for four to seven hours each day.¹⁶ We clearly have lost our balance. The scales have tipped. They're no longer even upright—they are falling over.

The 1000 Hours Outside premise isn't to set aside technology completely—it's not a binary choice. Rather, it's an invitation to chase after what's real, to strive for a desperately needed balance. Instead of being restricting, as in, "You must spend this many hours outside each year," the premise is inviting. You get to! The world is waiting for you!

How Did We Get Here?

We can't know what we don't know. I think many of us who have landed in this space and time—where we can buy refrigerators with built-in screens and ask Alexa to announce to our families that it's dinnertime—wonder how we arrived here in the first place. We're keenly aware that things have changed since we were kids, but we aren't sure to what extent. More importantly, does it matter? As previously mentioned, some generational changes are just that: changes. Others hold more far-reaching implications.

What I remember from childhood is that my group of peers was involved in a few after-school activities, maybe a sport and an instrument. We were all given some homework beginning in the fourth grade or so. But there was also a lot of freedom. There was television, but it wasn't unending, especially if you didn't have cable. There were video games, but they looked like baby cartoons in comparison to the immersive video games of today.

When I was a child, one of our first family computers had a whopping four gigabytes of memory that we divvied up among our family. In comparison, the current iPhone 14 offers options up to 512 gigabytes. Back then, we were beside ourselves with glee to have almost an entire gig in our individual ownership. There were squabbles when anyone went even slightly over their allotted limit. The twelve stages we were trying to defeat on the 1989 video game *Prince of Persia* were what occasionally took us over our maximum. These were the years we used terms like “CGA” and “VGA” and “Super VGA,” which would be completely foreign to digital natives.

There were even mobile phones during my childhood, but they weighed over four pounds and could only make

. . . wait for it . . . phone calls. How antiquated. We moved from using pliers for changing the television channel to being able to access an unending amount of streaming content from almost anywhere in the world with the swipe of a finger. In fact, the very first smartphone had eight gigabytes of memory, completely outshining our family's third iteration of personal computer. Eight gigs all to one person. What bliss. Who could have ever imagined?

In keeping with the rapid speed of technological change, Jerry Kaplan notes in *Humans Need Not Apply* that the memory storage in today's smartphone has over one million times as much memory as the Apple II computer from 1977, which sold for almost \$1,300. Taking into account inflation, that same computer today would cost around \$5,800. Kaplan compares the change to the speed of a snail versus the speed of an international space station.¹⁷

Every eighteen months to two years, processing speed doubles what it previously was, and this trend has been going on for fifty years with no end in sight. In his book *The Tech-Wise Family*, Andy Crouch writes, "The pace of technological change has surpassed anyone's capacity to develop enough wisdom to handle it."¹⁸ Indeed, my family would have been hard-pressed to imagine a world where we went from gleefully sharing four gigabytes to owning 128 times more than that at a fraction of the cost.

It was the electric telegraph in the 1830s that first allowed communication to travel at a speed greater than that of the human body. Neil Postman writes, "The telegraph created an audience and a market not only for news but for the fragmented, discontinuous, and essentially irrelevant news, which to this day is the main commodity of the news industry."¹⁹

Information consumption has skyrocketed to a whopping 11.8 hours of information received every single day for the

average American.²⁰ We spend 75 percent of our life receiving information.²¹ When I find myself in an endless scroll for any length of time, I often walk away feeling like what I saw was, as Postman put it, “fragmented, discontinuous, and essentially irrelevant.”

An increased pace can have unintended consequences. Today’s kids live with unrelenting pressures. To be sure, they have most of the pressures we had when we were young, yet these are often magnified many times over, and they are experiencing new ones as well. Consider the information overload they are dealing with day in and day out.

In his book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff places a list of first-grade readiness requirements from 1979 next to a list of requirements from 2019. In 1979, St. Theresa’s Catholic School in Austin, Texas, only had twelve items that were meant to decide whether a child was ready for the first grade. These included physical markers such as having two to five permanent teeth, being able to stand on one foot with eyes closed for at least five seconds, and being able to travel alone in the neighborhood (four to eight blocks) to a store, a school, a playground, or a friend’s house. Here, once again, we see the theme of physical safety being much less of a concern. The academic requirements were also minimal. Three out of the twelve dealt with academics, if you can even put this first one in that category:

1. Can he draw and color and stay within the lines of the design being colored?
2. Can he count eight to ten pennies?
3. Does your child try to write or copy letters or numbers?

In 2019, the first-grade readiness requirements for a school in Austin, Texas, included thirty items. In this list the

majority of the checklist revolves around academics. Some examples include:

1. Identify and write numbers to 100.
2. Count by tens to 100, by twos to 20, by fives to 100.
3. Interpret and fill in data on a graph.
4. Read all kindergarten-level sight words.²²

Learning hasn't always been equated with books. In his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, written in 1982, Neil Postman says, "In a world without books and schools, youthful exuberance was given the widest possible field in which to express itself. But in a world of book learning such exuberance needed to be sharply modified."²³

We've cut off much of that youthful exuberance as we've constructed childhoods that are overscheduled and overstimulating. Parents are pressured to build their children a résumé for life, but this approach isn't adequately preparing kids for what's ahead—and it's distracting from the experience-rich childhood that kids need today.

Living in the Present Prepares Kids for the Future

We never finished my Pinterest board activities—and yet all of our kids still miraculously learned their letters. It just so happens you don't have to make a jellyfish (or a jaguar or jungle) out of the letter *j* or perform a stellar rendition of "Jack and the Beanstalk" in order to prepare for life. Thank goodness.

Childhood isn't solely about preparation for the future. It's about the present. It's about the relationships we're building day in and day out while we're packing lunches

and playing board games. I want to live in the present as much as possible. I want to connect on a palpable level with our children where they are—here, right now, in our home. I want to meet their gazes, listen to their musings, and love them as they are. And herein lies the glorious thing: I believe that in doing so, in hearkening to the simple songs of our souls, we’re preparing them for the unknown.

Relationships are central to a rich life. Tom Hobson writes in *Teacher Tom’s Second Book*, “Getting along with our fellow humans is the real secret to future employment, not to mention happiness.”²⁴ Kim John Payne writes something similar in *Simplicity Parenting*: “The primary predictor of success and happiness in life is our ability to get along with others.”²⁵

A life filled with loving relationships will be broad and rich, and yet, though we’re more connected than ever before through technology, many of us still lack meaningful attachment. Ironically, Mark Zuckerberg, who cofounded the social media platform Facebook, is on a path to implementing a metaverse, a virtual place where we will “lose ourselves” and “not want to leave,” and that will be “the primary way we spend our time.” He’s creating this virtual world that we ostensibly won’t want to leave because he wants to “enable people to engage with one another.”²⁶ Hmm. That doesn’t seem to make sense. Maybe we don’t need this “help,” as humanity has been seeking connection since time immemorial.

Johann Hari brings up a good point in his book *Stolen Focus*. If social media companies really desire to bring us together, why don’t they show us through their apps where our friends are physically? Then we could go see them and say “Hi!” face-to-face. Bring the card games and some queso. Let’s go for a walk. But then we would have to put our phones down and close the apps that are meant to capture

our eyeballs and equate to a bottom-line profit model that requires us to stay put.

When reality is no longer the primary “real” in our lives, we reach a scary crossroads. Is being overtaken by technology inevitable? Should we throw in the towel? Or should we fight those feelings of inevitability with a push for staying in the present as much as possible?

Only 35 percent of teenagers socialize face-to-face anymore. The remainder of them communicate via screens.²⁷ During a conversation, eye contact is needed 60 to 70 percent of the time in order to build an emotional connection (though this may vary due to cultural norms). Yet the average adult today only makes eye contact between 30 to 60 percent of the time in a typical conversation.²⁸ Are handheld devices at play here? How well are screens truly enabling us to engage with each other on a meaningful level? By many measures, the effect seems to be one of social illusion rather than deep connection.

Technology creeps in, and then it takes over. We’ve seen it time and time again. And it’s creeping in faster and faster. Older technologies took decades to sweep through culture. Eighty years passed before the telephone was a part of thirty-five million American households. The automobile slid into that many homes in fifty years. The radio needed only twenty-five years, the television just ten. Apple’s iPhone, which launched midyear in 2007, sold almost seventy-two million phones by 2011. It more than doubled what the telephone did in eighty years . . . in less than five. Integration is happening at a breakneck speed.

But nature holds the same capacity to creep in and take over. It’s relentless too. It doesn’t give up. It knows its rightful place. Even in a parking lot washed over with concrete, nature will relentlessly push through the narrow cracks and crevices. And

from nature, we can draw some resolve as parents. In order to prepare our children for the future and enjoy our lives with them today, the key is to step back to a slower pace, leaving margin for play and exploration so that we can go forward.

Imagine swinging in a hammock with your child, sprawling out on a picnic blanket with some of your favorite books and games, making a flip-book, creating worlds out of blocks, or hiking to a waterfall with its thunderous sounds and having the assurance that this is enough. You can preserve and protect your relationship with your child. You can fully enjoy their company while at the same time prepare them for the future.

While they may not overtly state it, big-technology businesses essentially view us as products. They profit off our time and attention in the form of advertising dollars. When we return to play, we step out of a business model that is meant to keep us stuck and sedentary. When our lives are filled with all the things that make us feel fully human, we begin to run out of time for screens and shake free from the grasp of the tech overlords.

The chasm is widening. Virtual experiences are making a good run at seeming real, but we know deep down that they are not the same. Even immersive technologies that surround us with content don't satisfy in the same way as a cup of tea with a friend or a gulp of fresh air in the winter does. The ever-increasing chasm may make us feel like we have to choose one side or the other or we will free-fall in the middle. That is not the case. We can plant ourselves firmly where we want to be and build an ever-expanding bridge to the other side, visiting only when we want or need to. An awareness of the past gives us a better understanding of what we need to be vigilant about today, and it gives us hope that no matter what rapid changes are yet to come, humanity still reigns supreme.



Discussion Questions

1. Share a few of your favorite memories from childhood.
2. Talk about some childhood memories where adults weren't present or directing your play. How did you feel about those times? Do you look back on those memories fondly?
3. In what ways is the childhood of your child (or grandchild) different from yours? Which of these differences strikes you as positive? Which strikes you as negative?

Action and Adventure Prompts

1. Talk to someone from a previous generation and learn about their childhood. Make a book that displays some of the main differences between their generation and yours.
2. If it fits with your culture, set a timer and have a conversation where you try to maintain eye contact 60 to 70 percent of the time. Talk about how this feels.
3. Print out a free 1000 Hours Outside tracker at 1000HoursOutside.com/Trackers and start being intentional about filling your year with real-life experiences.