

Being Outdoors with My Children

by Amy Robertshaw

My two year old daughter awoke the other morning in her crib and stripped down to her "birthday suit" before she called out her greetings. "Morning Mama!" As I placed her down on the floor she quickly grabbed a tube of cream I had mistakenly left on a lower shelf the night before. "**Cream,**" she squealed in delight as she grabbed it and squeezed with all her might. "**My cream,**" and off she ran, seeing a chance at a quick get-a-way. My six year old son loves to see his little sister pull a fast one on mommy. He gleefully began to jump on his bed, laughing and cheering Ava on. As my children know, I am not much of a chaser- only true danger kicks me into fast motion. For the moment, I sat on the floor contemplating that if this is how the first 5 minutes of our day had gone – what might this day hold in store? So, I began to sing a little song, made up in the moment; "We've got to get outside...outside...outside. The birds are singing...calling...telling us to come."

Outside. What is it about being outdoors that seems to make everything so much better? Some days, after prolonged negotiations of getting dressed, brushing teeth, and tying shoes I can feel the weight of the morning's frustrations in the air of our home. It's as if, I think, the house simply cannot always hold all of our energy. As we head outside, I imagine that the frustrations I am carrying simply float away. Up into the air... dissipating into the atmosphere. Suddenly I feel like I am breathing deeper. I have renewed energy to face the day. And as for my children... the difference is immediate. Something in them dissipates as well as they run and jump and play. The yells and squeals of delight are absorbed by the sky, the trees and the flowers. There is space; space to run and roam, freedom from being contained within the walls of our home. I believe my children are breathing deeper, too.

Our outdoor adventures are usually as simple as heading to our own backyard. Sometimes my husband and I walk with the children to the end of our road or around the block or to the glorious cemetery near our home. There is nothing to plan or organize or structure. Therein lies part of the magic of being outdoors... *unstructured time.* Unstructured time to play, to wander, to explore the natural world in which we have inherited is a gift to both ourselves as adults, and perhaps even more importantly to the children in our care. Suddenly, we simply can *be...* taking in whatever the world offers on this day.

Let me admit something here. The end of this past school year struck a bit of fear in my heart. Without the wonderful rhythms that being in school invites, I felt as if I was faced with a mountain of days to fill. I began looking into camps and classes for my son. But Isaac was clear that he was not interested. Then I had the idea of planning regular play dates or activities with other moms and kids. That worked for about a week. Then came a deep breath... and the explorations began.

For the days when the backyard or the neighborhood could not contain us, there have been multiple opportunities for our family. How blessed we are here in the Monadnock region to be surrounded by so much natural beauty that is totally accessible to families and young children. We love to visit farms, especially Stonewall Farm where we visit the many animals, go for walks and even bring water shoes to explore the lovely shallow stream. Walking at Goose Pond is a delight as we have watched nesting birds, caught frogs, and picked blueberries.

As I have stood by watching my children shed their shoes and delve into the play of sandboxes and rolling in the grass I have felt such a satisfaction. I am grateful that Isaac was not interested in camps or classes, for this year at least. Instead he wisely knew what he needed. What we *all* needed in fact was as much unstructured outdoor play time as possible. I am thrilled that Isaac loves to pick blackberries and catch frogs. I love that Ava loves to "walk, walk" and puts special rocks and flowers in her pockets. (They also have an added bonus – a dad who loves the outdoors and teaches this family a deep reverence for nature.) I realize that when we go outside, we shed more than just our shoes; we shed the call of our belongings and tasks; a call that we hear so much louder inside our homes.

I am no expert in parenting practices. And let me be clear that all of our summer explorations have not been heavenly experiences with angelic voices singing off in the distance. Of course, everything has its moments... good and bad. Furthermore I know that as a parent we can all be inundated with "shoulds" from the parenting experts. It begins with how to bear and birth the child to every conceivable parenting choice from that point onward. One thing is true though. Few of the ideas out there in the parenting world are as simple as lacing up your shoes and stepping outdoors.

Over the past decade we have all been reading more and more about the decline of outdoor play or any *unstructured* play for children. Entire volumes can and have been written on the subject. Richard Louv's, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* is a wonderful book for our times. It's not news to any of us that studies have shown an increase in the indoor sedentary childhood experience. Nor is it news to us this indoor sedentary experience is linked to a host of mental health problems.¹

In this fast paced world, with such an emphasis on high academics some schools have reduced playtime and recess to maximize teaching time. The American Academy of Pediatrics wrote a report in defense of play in response to many federal education policies threatening free play and unscheduled time. The report stated that "free and unstructured play is healthy and – in fact- essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient."²

I wonder what else we lose when we squeeze out the so called extras of free play and outdoor recess. Have we as a culture begun to forget the benefits of playing freely outdoors? "We all need to feel the sun on our face, the wind on our back, and the grass between our toes. Children are no exception. Even very young babies take great sensuous delight when they experience warm water or a breeze on their skin, or see dappled sunlight through a canopy of trees," says Jane Bartlett in *Parenting with Spirit*.

Play. It is the magic of childhood. In the book *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, Edward Hallowell, MD says "play is a fundamental key to a life of joy."³ What else, fellow parents, do we want for our children? As we have stood over our newborn babes, haven't we all prayed that this child may simply know joy and happiness? Perhaps we can truly give them the gift of joy by allowing them to *cultivate the skill to play*. And perhaps the best place to cultivate that skill is outdoors, where sticks and puddles and rocks become the toys from which our children build their creativity and imaginations.

Summer is nearly upon us. The gifts of summer will fade away but the memories will linger. Let this be an invitation for us all to create as much unstructured playtime in our family life as is possible. I end with a quote from *Sanctuaries of Childhood*, by Shea Darian:

"As parents and caregivers guiding this generation of children, let us seek out field and forest, where souls may be nourished with the earth's wild beauty. Let us explore lakes, rivers, state parks, farms near our homes. Let us plant more gardens, take more hikes, sit quietly on a hilltop to watch the sun make its dusky descent.... Let us climb trees and roll in the grass, and look full into the face of every flower we meet. Let us take more time in our daily journey to set our hearts ablaze and infuse our minds with the glory of creation."⁴

¹ Louv, page 32

² aap.org

³ Hallowell, page 103

⁴ Darian, *Sanctuaries of Childhood*