



# Play and Folklore

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## CONTENTS

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- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| 1. 'The Joy of Playing Naturally' – Carla Pascoe   | Page 2  |
| 2. 'With Respect: Adult Contexts for Children's Play' – Gwenda Beed Davey & Judy McKinty | Page 5  |
| 3. 'Why Kids Don't Run Free' – Matt Condon   | Page 12 |
| 4. 'Let Kids Rule the Playground' – June Factor  | Page 19 |



This issue of *Play and Folklore* focuses on the significance of play in children's lives, its continuity over generations and varying contemporary adult approaches to children's play, both in schools and in the wider community. It includes two articles previously published in Australian newspapers (*The Courier-Mail* in Brisbane and *The Age* in Melbourne), a paper presented at the *Children's Cultures: Universality and Diversity* conference at the University of Nantes, France, in March 2007, and an account of a symposium, *Come and Play Outside*, held at the University of Western Australia in September 2007.

Until quite recently in academia in Australia, childhood and play were subjects largely restricted to early childhood educators. The study of children's folklore was limited to a handful of dedicated individuals. That is gradually changing. Encouraging evidence of this change includes the Australian Research Council's four-year grant to collect and analyse Australian children's playlore (see Issue no. 49), the WA symposium outlined in this issue of *Play and Folklore*, and a conference, *(Re)Discovering Childhood*, at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne in July 2008.

We are happy to publicise news of international gatherings and publications on these topics, such as the forthcoming International Toy Research Association conference in Nafplion, Greece in July 2008. And as always, *Play and Folklore* welcomes contributions, both national and international.

Gwenda Beed Davey and June Factor

## The Joy of Playing Naturally

Carla Pascoe

Sometimes it is difficult to appreciate the value of simple, everyday experiences until they come under threat. So it is with children's outdoor play. Children have been playing outdoors in nature since time immemorial, but the highly specific cultural and spatial conditions of post-industrial societies are threatening this ancient tradition in the early 21st century. Some see this as inevitable: children will play inside more as technologies of entertainment become more seductive and outdoor dangers more terrifying. Nevertheless, a group of determined outdoor play advocates met at the University of Western Australia in Perth in September 2007 to discuss how they could counteract this trend. The symposium was entitled 'Come and Play Outside'.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the genuinely interdisciplinary and international contributions of participants, a broad consensus emerged. Everyone involved agreed that children prefer playing outside and that it is healthier for them. From improved social and cognitive development to reduced stress, unstructured outdoor play delivers a range of advantages to children.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, opportunities for children to play outside are diminishing, and symposium participants spent much time discussing why this is occurring.



Girl learning to ride a bike, Wodonga, 1956

Source – Photographer: James Higgins Quirk 1911-1973  
Image courtesy of Jill Quirk.

Tim Gill is one of the most prominent English advocates for children's play and his book *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk-Averse Society* has just been released.<sup>3</sup> He argues that 'we need to accept that it is natural and healthy for children to explore, take risks,



make mistakes, seek out adventure and test boundaries'.<sup>4</sup> As adult fears for children increase exponentially amongst developed nations, children's freedoms are increasingly restricted. But given that childhood is a process of gradually learning competencies through taking risks and trying new challenges, restricting children's independence ironically increases their likelihood of harm by leaving them less capable actors in the world.

Not only do children have less freedom than they once did, but there are also fewer natural spaces available to children to play. Robert Pyle, an American naturalist and writer, explained that a sense of place is gained through intimate contact with natural landscapes, emphasising the importance of the 'presence of special places and the liberty to encounter them at will'. He argued that as children's actions are limited by regulations in genuinely wild areas such as national parks, we should be protecting small pockets of unofficial countryside – such as overgrown vacant lots or abandoned buildings – where children can play and explore freely.<sup>5</sup>

Margaret Grose, University of Melbourne lecturer and symposium convenor, argued that over-design is common in children's playgrounds, when actually such spaces should be wild enough to enable a sense of discovery. She described the Leftover Lands Movement in Germany, in which former industrial sites are allowed to be overgrown with plants and left for children to explore, with trained staff providing minimal supervision.

And there are other international initiatives to provide the kinds of play spaces that children most appreciate. Karen Malone from the University of Wollongong described a UNESCO project called Growing Up in Cities, which aims to include children as co-researchers, asking them to evaluate their local environment and propose ways to improve it.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, UNICEF's Child-friendly Cities programme enlists children in the process of improving the liveability of their urban environments.<sup>7</sup> Malone argued that we need these kinds of projects more than ever because Generation Z are a highly protected and heavily scheduled group of children with anxious Generation X parents who over-intellectualise parenthood.

Several speakers at the symposium are practitioners who design natural play spaces for children. They exhibited some stunning and innovative examples of their recent work. Ron King from the USA explained that American children aged 0-5 years spend an average of 12,500 hours in childcare outside the home, so it is vital that we design imaginative play spaces for these centres. He pointed out that whilst the playground industry now follows strict safety standards, playground injuries have not decreased. King's explanation for this paradox is that children are bored by standardised plastic play environments and so engage in risk-taking behaviour, which leads to injuries. His solution is that we purposely create complex natural play spaces, because when children are surveyed they overwhelmingly prefer natural to manufactured play environments. Some of the playground designs King displayed included features such as water, wooden furniture, fire pits, in-grounds slides, pathways, labyrinths, slopes, environmental art, natural fences and digging opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

Helle Nebelong provided some beautiful examples of natural playgrounds from her work in Denmark. She argued that children do not need bright, primary colours; rather, they need to relax their eyes and mind through the 'mental silence' bestowed by nature. Boredom is the route to growth, in her opinion, when children are forced to learn how to entertain themselves. Her landscape architectural practice creates gardens of the



senses, where places deliberately appeal to our senses of hearing, smell, taste, sight and touch.<sup>9</sup>

Zoe Metherell works as a landscape architect in Melbourne and spoke to the symposium about planning whole neighbourhoods for children. She argued that planners need to identify the barriers between children and their local parks, and think about providing off-road links between recreational areas to create an interconnecting park system. Parks should be planned on a neighbourhood scale, rather than individually, to provide a diversity of types of play spaces in any one locality. She believes that playgrounds should be open-ended spaces for free play, which integrate natural elements and provide sensory richness. They should leave open opportunities for creative play and present enough visual and physical complexity to constitute an invitation to children to explore.

Overall, the symposium was framed as an invitation to participants to consider ways in which we can ensure that natural play opportunities exist for children. In many developed nations, well-meaning adults have restricted the spatial and temporal freedoms of children and civilised many of the wilder spaces in which they once played.



Girls discovering marine life, Sandringham Beach, 1959

Source – Photographer: James Higgins Quirk 1911-1973  
Image courtesy of Jill Quirk

Rather than standardised, prefabricated play equipment or vast expanses of grass and asphalt, the Come and Play Outside symposium encouraged us to cultivate pockets of natural play potential and leave children to decide just how they wish to experience them.

Carla Pascoe works as a curator with the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria. She is also researching a PhD at the University of Melbourne which investigates how physical environments influenced the experience of childhood in 1950s Australia.



## Endnotes

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1 Come and Play Outside symposium, The University of Western Australia, 28-29 September 2007. The programme is available at [http://www.ias.uwa.edu.au/\\_\\_\\_data/page/113057/Come\\_and\\_Play\\_Outside\\_Program\\_September\\_2007.pdf](http://www.ias.uwa.edu.au/___data/page/113057/Come_and_Play_Outside_Program_September_2007.pdf).

2 The Children & Nature Network have constructed two annotated bibliographies of research on children's outdoor play. See: <http://www.cnaturenet.org/research/Intro>.

3 Tim Gill, *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk-Averse Society* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007).

4 A number of his articles are available online. See: <http://www.rethinkingchildhood.com/>.

5 For a lengthier exploration of some of these ideas, see: Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons From an Urban Wildland* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

6 The home page for *Growing Up in Cities* is at: <http://www.unesco.org/most/guic/guicmain.htm>.

7 The Child Friendly Cities is at: <http://www.childfriendlycities.org/>. Karen has also written on this topic in: Karen Malone, 'United Nations: a key player in a global movement for child friendly cities' in B. Gleeson and N. Sipe (eds.), *Creating Child Friendly Cities: Reinstating Kids in the City* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006) pp. 13 - 32.

8 Information on Ron's designs and the research underpinning them is available at: [www.naturalplaygrounds.com](http://www.naturalplaygrounds.com).

9 For more on Helle's work see: <http://www.sansehaver.dk/asp/side/english.html>.

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## WITH RESPECT: ADULT CONTEXTS FOR CHILDREN'S PLAY

Gwenda Beed Davey & Judy McKinty

The following paper was presented at the *Children's cultures: universality and diversity* conference at the University of Nantes, France, in March 2007

The Australian Research Council is the Australian Government's principal provider of research funds for projects in science, social science and the humanities, and on 1 July 2006 the ARC announced a major award for a project in children's culture, named 'Childhood, Tradition and Change: a national study of the historical and contemporary practices and significance of Australian children's playlore'<sup>1</sup>. This 'linkage' project involves a consortium of three universities, Melbourne and Deakin Universities (Melbourne, Victoria), Curtin University (Perth, Western Australia), the National Library of Australia and Museum Victoria. Dr June Factor, a keynote speaker at this conference, is a Principal Researcher with the ARC Childhood project.

In a climate of fierce competition for research funds in Australia, the provision of funding for a four-year, nation-wide project on children's play is a clear indication of the growing importance being accorded to children's cultures, not only in Australia, but internationally.



In 2003 the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage called on signatories to safeguard and 'ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned'.<sup>2</sup> Children's traditional play is part of the intangible cultural heritage of children around the world, and in many places it is, indeed, in need of safeguarding and respect from the adults who influence children's lives.

In May 2006 Dr Michael Patte presented a paper to The Association for the Study of Play Conference in Canada. His paper was entitled 'What's Happened to Recess?'<sup>3</sup> and looked at free play time in Pennsylvania's elementary schools. Patte discussed the alarming decimation of children's play in many schools in the United States. He quoted from the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (2004), which states that:

*Since 1990, 40 percent of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted or are considering deleting recess from the daily elementary school schedule due to increased pressure from numerous sources to improve academic achievement.*<sup>4</sup>

Of particular significance, noted Patte, is the No Child Left Behind Act,<sup>5</sup> signed into law by President George W. Bush on 8 January 2002, which has resulted in many places in a focus on academic achievement and evaluation to the detriment of children's free play, and the development of an adult-created political context inimical to children's cultures.



Boys playing monkeys

Source – Judy McKinty

Michael Patte's 2006 TASP paper called on adults such as teachers, schools and families to oppose this political intervention in children's lives by a series of measures. Patte argues that adults should:

- *advocate for recess at the local, state and national level;*
- *document the positive outcomes associated with recess;*
- *initiate public discourse concerning recess; and*
- *hold public officials accountable for policies that impinge upon daily recess.*



The Australian Research Council project 'Childhood, Tradition and Change' will provide an opportunity to examine the 'state of play' in Australian primary school playgrounds in every Australian State and Territory, to establish whether playtime is similarly under threat in Australia, and whether traditional games still flourish alongside today's electronic games and other forms of activity.

An inspiration for the application to the Australian Research Council was a project carried out in 2005 and 2006 and initiated by the National Library of Australia's Oral History and Folklore Section. This children's folklore project aimed to enrich the National Library's considerable holdings in children's folklore which are listed in an on-line guide entitled 'Fish Trout, You're Out!'<sup>6</sup> The Library's project was carried out in the State of Victoria, in three primary schools, and became a de facto pilot for the Australian Research Council project, in which the National Library plays a major role.

The pilot project provided some interesting findings. Harcourt Valley Primary School is a rural school in the heart of Victoria's apple-growing region. It has 100 pupils and is ethnically almost entirely Anglo-Celtic.

By contrast, Preston West Primary School is a culturally diverse school in an inner suburb of Melbourne. It has 300 pupils from over 50 countries, and only 50% are of Anglo-Celtic background. There are 29 home languages other than English spoken by the children, including Arabic, Greek, Hindi, Indonesian, Italian, Mandarin, Somali, Urdu and Vietnamese. Both Harcourt Valley and Preston West Primary Schools have a harmonious playground and a rich play culture.

In both schools play has been facilitated by contexts, both environmental and socio-psychological, in which adults have played a crucial role. During the 1990s, two Harcourt primary schools (Harcourt and Harcourt North) were merged to form Harcourt Valley Primary. During the merger discussions for the selection of the site for the new school, parents and staff alike agreed that major criteria were that the site had to be the same or larger than the existing Harcourt North school, and that it had to have an existing pine plantation. Pine tree plantations are a common financial investment for schools in this region, and were highly valued by many teachers and parents, as well as children, as a children's play area. In particular, sociodramatic play flourished in 'the pinies', as the plantations were called, through the building of 'cubby houses'. The cubbies were often elaborate constructions, with children bringing building materials from home, even though they may have a short life, when the children would pull the structures down and begin building again. In the case of the Harcourt schools, past and present, adults helped to provide a rich environmental context, 'the pinies', for children's play.

In contrast to Harcourt Valley, Preston West Primary School is a double-storey brick building in a densely-populated inner suburb of Melbourne. The school opened in 1915, over 90 years ago. Traditionally a working-class suburb, Preston now has a few pockets of expensive housing, so the children at the school come from a diverse range of ethnic groupings and socio-economic backgrounds. The school prides itself on being 'representative of the modern day multicultural Australia'<sup>7</sup>.

The Principal, Craig French, sees the school as being very much part of the wider community, and the teachers take a positive and inclusive approach in their interactions with the children. For instance, one of the guiding principles of the school is to recognise



and reward achievement and effort, not just academically, but in all areas of the child's development. There is a weekly award for academic achievement, but there is also another award, called the 'You Can Do It' Award<sup>8</sup>, which is presented to children each week for 'getting along'<sup>9</sup>, which in this case means having positive interactions with each other. This type of supportive school environment builds the children's confidence and self-esteem, and encourages them to feel a sense of ownership in their school.

Outside in the playground, there is a Yard Duty Reward system, which aims 'to encourage positive playground behaviour by rewarding those who play well, care for others, help out and so on.'<sup>10</sup> This means that the teachers on yard duty assume a different role to the traditional patrolling supervisor, whose job it is to keep an eye out for children who might be enjoying themselves too noisily, too roughly, too quickly, in the wrong place or even, in some instances, upside-down.

At Preston West, the time spent outside in the playground is regarded as an important part of the whole school day, and free play is recognised as being a fundamental activity for children. The adults have what Iona and Peter Opie call 'respect for the juvenile code'<sup>11</sup>. During the recess and lunch breaks, children go about the serious business of organising their play without having to take into account a long list of adult-imposed restrictions. This enables them to plan their activities knowing that they will not be disturbed before the school bell calls them back into class.

At the beginning of the Children's Folklore project, Ruth Hazleton and Judy McKinty documented the playground by taking photos and mapping the different play spaces. There are areas with different ground surfaces: hard asphalt, grass, gravel, wood chips, and natural or built features: trees, taps, logs, fences, bushes, seats, play equipment and the school building itself. Almost everything is used for playing on, under, in, behind, between and with.

This is a school playground which has not been landscaped or tidied up. It is full of what Danish researcher Kim Rasmussen calls 'children's places':<sup>12</sup> special places created by children themselves, or used by them in a certain way, that have a meaning and significance largely hidden from adults. Rasmussen makes the distinction between these places and 'places for children',<sup>13</sup> areas carefully designed and made for children's use by architects, planners and other well-meaning adults. Heather Russell, an Australian ethnographer who studied the relationship between play and place in an Australian primary school, asserts that:

*There is no doubt that children's perception of the landscape is different from adults'. Children use the environment, play with it and invest a meaning into it which adults do not know about or care to ask about.<sup>14</sup>*

Some of the 'children's places' at Preston West Primary School include exposed roots at the base of a tree; the space between the fence and the cricket nets, where you can play 'Monkeys'; the far back corner of the grassed oval – the traditional place for Grade 6 boys and girls to play a secret adolescent game called 'Drop the Tray'; a particular corner of the covered walkway where boys always go to play their card game; and another popular card-playing area – the narrow space between the sports equipment shed and another building. Drinking taps are used as 'the barleys',<sup>15</sup> a safe rest area in the game of 'Gang Tigg', and a green, grassy strip under the shade of some peppercorn



trees is where boys plan their battles and choose sides when they play 'Lord of the Rings' and other war games.

Within the cultural landscape of the playground, the children are master organisers. They determine what they will play and where, according to the 'place traditions'<sup>16</sup> within the school. Heather Russell determined that :

*These place traditions imposed another layer of order on the apparent disorder of recess and lunchtime activity. Place traditions defined appropriate areas for certain types of play without having to have exclusive age-related play areas dictated by teachers.<sup>17</sup>*

It should be noted that all grade levels at Preston West, except the Preparatory year, the first year of school, are composite classes – Grade 1/2, Grade 3/4 and Grade 5/6 – so the age range within each class is greater than in traditional single year levels. Outside, the children play freely across different age-groups, as in their own families, and this results in a harmonious playground, with no hint of territorial boundaries.

The richness of the play at the school reflects the children's sense of ownership of the playground and their easy familiarity with every inch of space in the schoolyard. The large gravel area, often the first to be redeveloped in schools of this era, is dusty and hot in summer, but is perfect for role-playing games like 'Mums, Dads and Gardens', played under the shade of a small tree, using found materials like a paper bag, pieces of glass, leaves, sticks and stones; and where else could you make 'Snow Angels' in summer? The gravel version is called 'Sand Fairies'. In winter the whole gravel area becomes a seething mass of children playing marbles. The teachers describe it as a phenomenon to see with one's own eyes.

Games that use natural and found materials are played all over the playground. The potential for imaginative play in a discarded snack food bag or lolly wrapper, combined with some dirt, sticks, stones and leaves, is boundless. In the schoolyard we saw two small boys playing in the sandpit with an empty drink bottle and some sticks; three girls playing 'Noughts and Crosses with Drawing Rocks' by scratching a grid on the asphalt with a rock and using wood chips as their playing pieces; a 'cake' made from sand and sticks; and a shop with a display of 'goods' gathered from the surroundings for sale, with the shop counter already provided, albeit unintentionally, by the adults who designed the play equipment.

If the playground is the domain of the children, so, too, is the classroom at recess and lunchtime on wet days. The Wet Day Timetable is an exercise in trust, with the teachers adjourning to the staff room and the children playing in their classrooms. One teacher supervises four classrooms at a time by visiting them in turn during the break. Apart from this required supervision, the children are free to organise themselves and their time in their own way, resulting in happy, independent activity.

On one rainy day, Grade 5 & 6 students planned a dance for their graduation, played table tennis and explained to us how boys and girls kiss without touching lips in 'Spin the Bottle'. In Grade 3 & 4, they were spinning around in the teacher's chair and making 'Chatterboxes', in Grade 1 & 2 they were reading and playing games, and in Grade Prep they were making a cubby house from chairs and a piece of cloth, and playing 'Harry Potter' with magic wands made from construction pieces. At the end of the break when



the bell rang, the teachers appeared at the door and called to the children. The play equipment was packed up, the classroom restored to order, and classes began again.

Children in Australia attend primary school for seven years, and these are also their peak playing years, the running, jumping, hopping, skipping, clapping and 'mucking around' years when they become immersed in their own culture and play lore. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In our desire to become 'the clever country'<sup>18</sup>, we should not forget Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

*States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts<sup>19</sup>*



Sand Fairies

Source – Judy McKinty

By respecting 'the juvenile code'<sup>20</sup> that exists in schools as it does elsewhere in children's lives, the teachers and parents of Harcourt Valley and Preston West Primary Schools are giving children a positive alternative to the kind of school that prompted the Opies to write:

*...in our continual search for efficient units of educational administration we have overlooked that the most precious gift we can give the young is social space: the necessary space – or privacy – in which to become human beings.<sup>21</sup>*

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## Endnotes

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[http://www.prestonwest.vic.edu.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=27](http://www.prestonwest.vic.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=27)

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11 Opie, I. & P., *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford University Press, London, 1969 p. 14

12 Rasmussen, Kim, 'Places for Children – Children's Places', in *Childhood*, Vol 11, No. 2, Sage Publications, London, 2004, p. 155

13 Ibid

14 Russell, H., 'Revisiting the "Child Festival": Some Thoughts on New Directions for Play Research in Primary School Settings', in *Play & Folklore* No 33, December 1997, p. 6

15 'The barleys' at this school means a safe place where players can rest during a game. Anyone touching 'the barleys' is temporarily out of the game and cannot be caught.

16 Russell, H., 'Foo Foo Come To School: A Case Study in Place-making Traditions in a Primary School Playground', in *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter* (now *Play & Folklore*) Nos 30-31, November 1996, p. 12

17 Ibid

18 Hawke, R.J., Speech by the Prime Minister to the National Press Club, Canberra, 21 March, 1990  
<http://docushare.unisa.edu.au/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1446/1-6-3-10.pdf>  
N.B. The notion of Australia as a 'clever country' has been a recurring theme in Australian political commentary since Hawke's speech.

19 UNESCO, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 31  
[http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/CHILD\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/CHILD_E.PDF)

20 Opie, P. & I. 1969, op. cit.

21 ibid

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Gordon Dowell, researcher and photographer at Harcourt Valley Primary School  
Ruth Hazleton, co-researcher and photographer at Preston West Primary School



War Games

Source – Judy McKinty



## Why kids don't run free

Matt Condon

I find myself standing rigidly to attention, head still, staring straight ahead, hands by my side like a toy soldier in the circle of 36 children when Rama the Water Buffalo turns to me and whispers out of the side of her mouth, 'What name would you like?'

I grin woodenly at the expectant children. They're all staring at me, issuing steamy little breaths on this winter's night. I'm a stranger to the pack and I have to be accounted for. 'I don't know', I tell Rama, perplexed.

'How about Jellyfish?' she asks.

'Yes, that's fine, Jellyfish, sure.'

'Cubs!' shouts Rama (or Wendy Hedemann, in the real world). 'Tonight we have a guest, and his name is Jellyfish. Jellyfish was a Cub here in the early 1970s.'

I have decided, after more than 35 years, to revisit my old Scout group at The Gap in Brisbane's west as part of a wider investigation into whether the nature of childhood has changed over recent decades. To see if I can travel back in time, rummage through what's left of a period I remember as happy, innocent and inextricable from the environment, and compare the relics to the shiny lives played out by today's hi-tech, time-poor, street-savvy urban children.

'When Jellyfish was a cub, the den wasn't even here', Rama the Water Buffalo continues. 'It was somewhere else.' She is right, of course. Jellyfish's old den was a few streets east of this 'new' den, itself officially opened a generation or so ago, in 1974. Jellyfish's wooden den and its surrounding bushland have long been buried beneath the brick houses and pebbled driveways of Brisbane suburbia.

Water Buffalo has unwittingly relegated me to museum artefact. Worse, I've been dated and linked to these young children's parents. Even worse, I'm a creaky marine invertebrate aimlessly lolling somewhere between their parents' and their grandparents' era.

Yet for a moment, standing with them in that circle, I am taken back – by the perfume of gum trees on a brisk, clear night in Brisbane; the names from Kipling's *Jungle Book* and the whole unchanged mythology surrounding these little Cubs, especially the way they crouch in unison and touch the earth with the fore and middle fingers of each hand; the leather scarf woggles with the metallic pin in the shape of the state of Queensland; and a voice in the back of my head, our Akela, our mother wolf, leading us in the Cub mantra of dib-dibbing and dob-dobbing. Yes, Akela, we'll-do-our-best.

Tonight's cubmaster, Baloo the Bear (Daniel Green), doesn't flinch before his charges. I'm as big as Baloo. I'm older than Baloo. So why am I feeling anxious here in this fellowship of good, decent, cheek-red and ear-cold Lilliputians? I regret agreeing to Jellyfish. I wanted to be Hathi the Elephant or Keneu the Great War Eagle. I would have settled for Rikki-Tikki-Tavi the Mongoose. Why do I have to be some bell-shaped sea creature made up of 98 per cent water? Yet Jellyfish it is.



'Welcome, Jellyfish!' the Cubs shout in unison.

And as their greeting echoes off the walls of gums, and the red antennae lights of the Mt Coot-tha television towers flicker warmly beyond the canopies of leaves, a pint-sized wag adds: 'Jellyfish. Don't touch him!' The pack sniggers. Jellyfish stands there, smiling dumbly. 'Later,' says Water Buffalo, 'Jellyfish will talk to us about what it was like being a Cub at The Gap all those years ago.'

'Poor old Jellyfish,' I say, attempting a gag. Silence. Nothing. I flush to my hair roots. Instantly ... I'm ten years old again.

It's almost a prerequisite for a mature generation to look at the newest and lament the 'good old days', as if with each changing of the baton some quality is lost, some level of excellence diminished. Is it nostalgia, pure and simple? Or regret and envy at the passage of time? And in this emotive gruel, what is fact and what fiction? As American playwright William Inge (1913-1973) wrote: 'Events in the past may be roughly divided into those which probably never happened and those which do not matter.'



Source – Matt Condon

Inge may be right, but he was commenting in the context of a world yet to discover personal computers, the internet, electronic games, plasma screen televisions, mobile phones and DVDs. A society, too, crammed with twin-income households and stratospheric mortgages, extended average working hours, compressed urban living conditions, crippling traffic volume and a commensurately mistreated environment. In Inge's time, the generation gap could be skipped across. Today it is chasmic.

All this explains, in part, the curious publishing phenomenon that is *The Dangerous Book for Boys* by British brothers Conn and Hal Iggulden. Their book has spent the past year in the UK top ten non-fiction bestseller list, with 17 weeks at number one. An American version has just been published and is being discussed in the media with a

gravity that belies its seemingly lighthearted content. The Australian edition has recently been released.

*The Dangerous Book for Boys* is many things. It is a practical compendium of historical facts, figures and stories for boys, and an instruction manual on how to build a treehouse, a bow and arrow and a go-kart. It tells you how best to skip a stone and skin a rabbit. It teaches you how to use a compass and read the stars. It enshrines the sort of childhood that was commonplace as recently as the 1970s. It's a 'bible' of vanished boyhood. And it's a paean to loss.

As the authors write in their introductory note: 'Is it old-fashioned? Well, that depends. When you're a man, you realise that everything changes, but when you're a boy, you know different. You want to be self-sufficient and find your way by the stars. Perhaps for those who come after us, you want to reach them. Well, why not? Why not?'

That the book proclaims itself 'dangerous' is also a shot at a modern world riven with political correctness, with a fear of the 'outside' where strangers or bogeymen may lurk, a place where potential litigation precludes any full-bodied play. For all the anarchic glories of another era the book celebrates, its inescapable subtext poses the same question over and over – how did we manage to murder the simple and beautiful tenets of childhood?

In Australia, trees are removed from school playgrounds to eliminate the risk of injury. Childcare centres are permitted to have 'outdoor' play areas on the 'inside' (a bizarre notion enshrined by the Child Care Act in Queensland), complete with murals of trees, rivers and open fields. Their playgrounds are tightly fenced slices of fake grass, metal-tubed swing sets and shade sails where rocks and hillocks are cast in rubber. In the United States, recess or playtime, from kindergarten to high school, is gradually being abolished to accommodate more learning time. This, when an American child's exposure to television, the internet and computer games is averaging 45 hours a week, or six hours a day.

We're not far behind. According to a 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey, more than 38 % of our children aged between five and eight spend more than 20 hours a week watching television or videos. That leaps to 45.6 % of nine to 11-year-olds, though both group figures are marginally down on the previous 2003 survey. A report commissioned last year by Diabetes Australia also revealed that 280,000 young people aged between five and 19 were obese. Tasmanian Liberal Senator Guy Barnett said of the report: 'If nothing is done we will face a health crisis like we've never seen before.'

Are we seeing the early by-products of the first generation of 'indoor' children? Commentators, writers, educators and psychologists have begun to examine the disconnection between childhood and nature. Phrases have been coined – biophilia, nature-deficit disorder, etc. 'It's tragic', says Barrie Elvish, CEO of Queensland's C&K early childhood care network. 'The sanitisation of early childhood is an absolute disgrace and the end result is we're going to have children that are sense-deprived and have a limited understanding of the natural environment around them.'

Sit with Brisbane-based Prue Walsh, a world authority on playground design and early childhood development, and her concern is palpable. 'We are in a crisis. I believe children are being jeopardised now. The symptoms are already appearing. The obesity, poor co-ordination, antisocial aggression in children's behaviour. Put children in tight



spaces and their behaviour breaks down. We're in desperate need of really serious research in some of these areas.'

Dr June Factor, of the University of Melbourne, has spent much of her life documenting the history of the Australian playground. Her books, and the Australian Children's Folklore Collection [of Museum Victoria], examine children's games, songs and myths over time. She is perplexed by contemporary society's attitude to play. 'The question you ultimately have to ask is, do we really have to put so many impediments in their (children's) way? It's a disregard of what children's interests are. It's a form of contempt.'

How could we have gotten childhood so wrong, and so quickly? How did we lose it, when our own early experiences still tease our memories like fond fairytales?

As kids, we simply knew it as the bamboo. It loomed at the end of our dog-leg street at The Gap, in a patch of scrub where the rainwater drains emptied out. To get to it on foot (and bare at that), you left the L-shaped black bitumen and traversed a narrow dirt track. It seemed like a dangerous journey back in the late 1960s and early '70s. It was, in reality, no more than 10 metres from civilisation.

But it was another world, this giant, towering stand of clumping bamboo. Inside was a natural amphitheatre which seemed to hold its own night and day. Looking up, it could have been some magical cathedral of cane and shoots, and it towered forever. And the one thing you never forgot – the perennial creak of the limbs. Without a lot of imagination, we could have been cabin boys and girls below the deck of an ancient sailing ship.

We would convene at The Bamboo most days, this second home, this clubhouse, where we had control of the rules of living. What was discussed? It's impossible to remember. Doubtless there were the great, unending dialogues of what to do next, the news of the neighbourhood, nothing, everything, outside our structured 'other' lives of school and home.

There were attempts to affix objects to the pliable bamboo branches and send them into outer space. (Or at least to the moon, a very hot topic in The Bamboo in the winter of 1969.) Tunnels were made, drains were investigated. Cigarettes might have materialised, and a chorus of children's coughing competed with the groan of the bamboo.

My best friend in the street, Marco Briella, and I had a secret call, not unlike the shriek of a sulphur-crested cockatoo gagging on a woody cone. On hearing the call, we met at The Stump, the remains of a giant gum tree, at the end of the Briellas' enormous back yard – a full-sized block that Mr Briella had chosen not to sell or develop for the benefit of his children, and by proxy the rest of the kids in the street. At any given time it was home to a variety of handmade goalposts, athletic running tracks and long-jump pits, or a small village of cubbyhouses.

Then, at the top of the street, we had The Bush. The bitumen literally petered out into gravel, then a dirt track through thin scrub, which then went deeper into the northern foothills of the mighty Mt Coot-tha. It was in The Bush we became explorers. We checked the wobbly needles of compasses. Drank from water flasks that dangled off belts. Examined samples of granite embedded with glittering quartz and seams of fool's gold. We carried pocket knives and food provisions. We pocketed small animal bones and interesting flora and rock specimens, clawed towards a summit we never reached.



As it grew dark, the streetlights popped on. This was the sign to come home. The full stop of our day's play. And if we weren't in a position to see the lights coming to life – being deep inside The Bamboo, or held by the fascinations of The Bush - their illumination was soon followed by the melodic, richly familiar calls of our mothers. Those distinctive brays of family. We would be wrenched home, out of other worlds, by the sound of our mothers' voices.

In 2005 Richard Louv, a San Diego-based journalist and writer, published a book called *Last Child in the Woods*. His work, subtitled 'Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder', examined how early contact with nature was disappearing. The consequences, he warned, would be dire. The book became an unexpected bestseller, and has triggered devoted movements and societies throughout the world. 'Most children aren't playing outside anymore, not in the woods or the fields or the canyons,' Louv told *Qweekend*. 'Today, kids are well aware of the global threats to the environment, but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature on a day-to-day basis, is fading. A fifth-grader in a San Diego classroom put it succinctly: 'I like to play indoors better – that's where all the electrical outlets are.'

Louv, 58, conducted more than 3000 interviews with parents and children across the US as part of his research, and consistently encountered the same question – why has children's play dramatically transferred from outdoors to indoors?

*Nature-deficit disorder is a term I use to describe the human costs of alienation from nature. Among them – diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. I don't suggest that nature-deficit disorder represents a medical diagnosis, but the descriptive quality of the phrase helps us get a handle on what children lose when they lose direct contact with the outdoors. It's not overstating the case to say nature-deficit disorder also affects adults, neighbourhoods, whole communities, and the future of humankind's relationship to nature.*

He found that parents consistently cited similar reasons for the change: competition from television and computers; more homework and other time pressures; a lack of access to natural areas; and fear of traffic, crime, stranger-danger and nature itself. Indeed, most parents would be unaware that play has been formally recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as every child's right. (Conventions on the Rights of the Child, Article 31, 1, recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.)

So why are children stuck inside? According to Prue Walsh, 'Society is undervaluing childhood, that's number one. That reflects down the line. All levels of government underestimate children's needs. And the commercial operators have absolutely wreaked havoc in the profession of early childhood. I call them kid ghetto merchants.' Dr June Factor adds that the importance of unstructured play for children has been obliterated by adults. 'What we're interested in teaching children is all in aid of (them) getting a job, God help us,' she says. 'When you hear politicians talking, they only talk about education as if it were a sort of sausage machine. You put the child in at one end and out the other end come identical sausages that can go into the workforce and fulfil the requirements of the economy. When the economy is God, you can't take something like play seriously.'

Louv agrees. He says the lives of children worldwide are so rigidly organised and structured because of 'deep' adult concerns about the competitive economy – will their children get into a good college? Will they be able to survive in the global economy? All this angst, before children can properly read and write.



‘You’ve got the human being at its most spongelike, critical developmental stage where the most learning takes place, and we’re putting them in the hands of corporate profit and companies with an obligation to their shareholders’, says Barrie Elvish. ‘It’s all arse-about, excuse me. It’s crazy. A contradiction.’

Kathleen Bagot, an academic at Melbourne’s Monash University, has been studying early childhood development and its relationship with the external environment. ‘I think adults have lost touch with what’s important, and that flows through to how they manage their families,’ she says. ‘When kids were out playing they were testing themselves. You tried things out and you might have fallen down a couple of times but, in the end, you worked it out. You made decisions. You learned what not to do. With children today exposed to so many things, what are their limits? What do they do to test themselves? I personally think we’re creating little monsters that grow into big monsters.’

In Louv’s view, it is a folly to dismiss comparisons of childhood play – past and present – as an exercise in whimsical nostalgia. ‘Biologically, we’re still hunters and gatherers,’ he says. ‘Some of the most intriguing research has been inspired by Harvard University scientist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Edward O. Wilson’s ‘biophilia’ hypothesis. Wilson defines biophilia as ‘the urge to affiliate with other forms of life’. He and his colleagues argue that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world, probably a biologically-based need integral to our development as individuals.

‘The biophilia theory, though not universally embraced by biologists, is supported by a decade of research that reveals how strongly and positively people respond to such things as open, grassy landscapes, scattered stands of trees and winding trails. This is part of our humanity, and an iPod cannot replace it.’

In the two years since Louv published *Last Child in the Woods*, his message has been picked up by concerned educators, parents and governments across the world. In early July, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a proclamation supporting the California Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights. It listed ten activities that every child should have the opportunity to experience between the ages of four and 14, including being able to ‘splash in the water’, explore nature and ‘camp under the stars’.

Following the success of his book, Louv founded and now presides over the Children & Nature Network, an influential non-profit, non-political organisation aimed at giving every child the chance to interact with the outdoors. Last year it established its worldwide ‘Leave No Child Inside’ campaign.

Louv says he is surprised at what his book unleashed, yet is in no doubt about the source of the phenomenon. It was his childhood in Kansas City: ‘I grew up on the edge of the suburbs. I could go out my basement door and into a cornfield where my underground fort was, and then into the woods and fields that seemed to go on forever. Those woods and fields shaped me; they were my Ritalin.’



So I went back to my childhood street, and one sunny morning stood in front of the mighty, heaving ship of The Bamboo. The scrub around it had gone, replaced by a manicured little park and playground with a cluster of generic swing sets. It was named after a prominent local citizen of The Gap, since deceased. There were no children playing in the park, though it was school holidays.



I went over to The Bamboo and tentatively entered the dark amphitheatre. It was, naturally, a lot smaller than I remembered, but the carpet of leaves was there as always, and the music of the creaking. On one thick stand of bamboo someone called Jimbo had inscribed his name. And on another, a creepy sign of the times: U R GAY AND U WANT IT COME DOWN HERE. Through the bamboo clumps I could see outside to huge night-time security lights trained on the sacred grotto of my childhood. I searched for the Briella vacant lot, and The Stump. But a house now stood there, and The Stump was gone.

It was hard to know any longer what was real and what was invented, so I tracked down my childhood friend Marco - now a happily married and loving father and still living in Brisbane, just a couple of suburbs away - to gain some clarity on matters.

'I remember us going down to The Bamboo', Marco recalls. 'It was always creaking. It was a place of real solitude. And kicking those plastic footballs that were really hard at either end and stung your toes. You started a club in the street and made badges and you had to do daring things like run through the prickly patch to earn a badge. We had a cubby on the vacant lot, under the tree, and we had a fireplace in there where we'd light up a fire even in the middle of a sweltering summer. The woman next door was always sticking a hose through the fence at us.'

'Do you remember the secret call? It was like a giraffe with something stuck in its throat. As kids we'd leave in the morning and not come home until dusk. There was that hot-air balloon made out of garbage bags, with string and a piece of balsa wood at the bottom and a soft drink bottle lid full of kerosene. I lit it and it worked, it actually worked, and the balloon sailed into the sky and over the roofs of the houses. I thought it was going to burn down the suburb. It was a very good childhood when I think about it. It was very happy, and free.'

At the top of the street it was still possible to enter The Bush beyond a line of new houses, and late that morning I climbed a ragged path towards the summit. It was steeper than I remembered, the scrub thinner, and the hike was marked by discarded rubbish and the occasional ad hoc ramp built by daredevil cyclists. Near the top, over and around the huge heads of granite boulders (no doubt pitted with quartz and fool's gold), I came to a barbed wire fence. The summit remained unreachable.

At that moment, my twin sister called me on my mobile phone. 'Why are you puffing?' she asked.

'I'm on the side of the mountain, above the old street', I said. 'I'm trying to find what's left of our childhood.'

'You're there on your own?'

'Of course I'm on my own', I said.

'You shouldn't do those sorts of things on your own', she said. 'You could get murdered doing things like that.'



At The Gap scout den, Jellyfish stands in the shadows of a maelstrom of games being played under the stars. The Cubs squeal their way through Capture the Flag, Blind Pirate and Frogs & Tadpoles before retreating to the den. Ochme Udeh, 10, tells me he loves being a Cub because it is fun 'being outside, it gives you energy', and sometimes 'you lose weight from it'. He particularly likes outdoor cooking. Kurt Thomas, 9, says it's great because he is the 'leanest' kid for his height in his grade at school thanks to all the



outdoor activities and game-playing at Scouts. And Ross Jennings, 10, assures me that as a Cub 'you learn new skills and make new friends'.

It is heartening to learn that Scouts Queensland has 10,000 uniformed youth members, at least 3500 of whom are Cubs.

I give my little speech, as promised. I tell the assembled cubs what it was like to be in their shoes all that time ago, and they listen attentively. In the end they rise, stand to attention, and one of the Cubs says: 'Thank you, Jellyfish, for talking to us. A big bravo for Jellyfish! Cubs! B-R-A-V-O!'

Looking down at them I know, somehow, that the future of these children is secure, and that what is happening to them here on this cold Tuesday night will be connected to their lives as adults. They just don't know it yet.

I also feel that beyond the wooden den, in safe little suburban houses filled with other children right across the country, something very important is being lost at that moment, too. And those who are losing don't know it yet, either.

Matt Condon is a Queensland journalist. This article was first published in the *Courier-Mail Qweekend Magazine* on July 27, 2007.

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## LET KIDS RULE THE PLAYGROUND

### June Factor

'The consistent aversion of the child to carefully established reality is universal.' Thus wrote the Russian poet Kornei Chukovsky in the 1920s – and he was right. Children spend a great deal of their play time turning reality upside down:

*Ladles and jellyspoons  
I come before you  
To stand behind you  
To tell you something  
I know nothing about  
On Monday  
Which will be Good Friday  
There is a Mothers' meeting  
For Fathers only  
Entrance is free  
Pay at the door,  
Bring your own chairs  
And sit on the floor!<sup>1</sup>*

Children can be Martians, emperors and aeroplanes. They have imaginary friends, and talk happily to their dolls. They are fluent speakers of Pig Latin and other secret



languages, perform elaborate rituals to select the 'He' in a game, and know innumerable jokes and riddles, and an array of child-adapted verse:

*Mary had a little lamb,  
Her father shot it dead,  
And now it goes to school with her  
Between two chunks of bread.*

*Girls are sexy, made out of Pepsi.  
Boys are rotten, made out of cotton.  
Girls go to the gym to get more slim.  
Boys go to rugby to get more ugly.*

This is a subculture which mocks as well as mimics. The play with language – the deliberate subversion of adult-provided patterns and concepts – paradoxically strengthens children's understanding of the language, and of the culture in which it exists. By deliberately breaking the rules, the children reinforce their mastery. They are not just receivers of knowledge but manipulators and creators of it.

Everything is possible in play. It is an arena unfettered by gravity, time or the limitations of childhood. The Polish writer Bruno Schulz observed that for children 'there is no dead matter... lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life.'<sup>2</sup>

In voluntary play, children make the rules and organise the activities. They inherit play traditions and retain or alter them at will. In the contemporary world, where children increasingly control less and less, this is one area where they are the experts and the masters.

We have all been children, and yet we forget the importance of play in our young lives. Or we disregard children's play because it can't be significant. What do children know? Worst of all, we may attempt to control and direct it.

That is happening increasingly in primary schools. Teachers, fearful of the threat of litigation should a child be hurt while playing, are saying 'don't' to games that involve running, or throwing balls, or hiding, or climbing. In some schools, marbles have been banned – all that swapping and arguing about how many Cat's Eyes should be handed over for a fast Tom Bowler causes 'trouble'.

In parts of the United States it is even worse. Whole school districts have abolished recess – because play is regarded as a useless activity. A few years ago the Atlanta public school districts eliminated recess in elementary schools as 'a waste of time that would be better spent' on school work. According to the Atlanta superintendent of schools, 'we are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars.'<sup>3</sup> Other American schools have established 'socialised recess', where children are required to take part in structured, monitored activities invented and directed by adults.

What would a visiting Martian think of us? There are newspaper editorials and countless articles written about the dangers of children being overweight – and children are stopped from playing their energetic games. The government throws money at organised sport as a solution. But adult sports are competitive and skill-based. However



kindly and patient the instructors, many children dread their failure to catch, or run fast, or kick straight. They know they will be the last to be picked for a team. And some dread even more the looks of pity or contempt when they appear in shorts. They will do what they are forced to do, and escape as quickly as they can.

By contrast, the play children undertake voluntarily is collaborative far more than competitive. Part of the folklore of childhood that stretches back beyond memory, it allows for different levels of skill, and adapts the rules of a game to suit the participants. In a school in Brisbane some years ago, the boys played a game they called 'Non-Stop Cricket'. The players, using a rubbish tin for a wicket and a tennis ball, happily changed the rules to vary the length of the pitch: when the game slowed down because a batter was hard to get out, they made the pitch longer. It kept the game interesting, and was fairer to all players. Such play-friendly adaptations of adult games can be found in schools across the country.

Maintaining the continuity of play is a central goal. That was made clear to me by a group of 7- and 8-year-old boys I observed playing Marbles at a school in Clifton Hill. I asked: 'What happens if one player is so good he wins everyone else's marbles?'

'We have a rule for that', they said.

'What's the rule?'

'He has to put six marbles back into the ring, so the game goes on.'

Having children of my own, I thought to ask another question:

'And what if he won't?'

'We have a rule for that.'

'What's the rule?'

'We take the six marbles out of his pocket.'

For these children there was an even higher purpose than winning: the continuation of the game. Play is its own reward.

June Factor is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her latest children's folklore collection is *Okey Dokey Karaoke!* (Brolly Books). This article was first published in *The Age Education Supplement*, October 29 2007.

## Endnotes

1 K. Chukovsky, *From Two to Five*, Brisbane, Jacaranda Press, 1963 [1925], p.93

2 B. Schulz, 'Tailors' Dummies', from *Fictions of Bruno Schulz*, Picador/Pan, London, 1988 [1934], p.40

3 D. Johnson, 'All work and no play: should schools really skip recess?', *International Herald Tribune*, 8 April 1998

## Further Reading

An interesting article was published in *The New York Times Magazine* on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2008. Written by Robin Marantz Henig and titled 'Taking Play Seriously', the piece explores the importance of play in relation to human development.

– Ed



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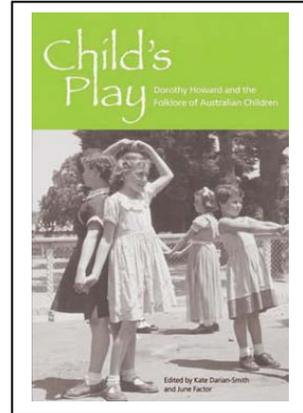
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