

Childhood Everlasting

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Childhood is a precious time of life. It's when you learn how to play with others, become strategic, learn compassion, become social, laugh, get hurt and heal. It is real interaction that cannot be compromised by television, the Internet or even virtual worlds. Childhood should be fun, and shared with the world.

On this lovely spring day, although I have a pressing deadline, I spent the day outdoors with my two kids. My nearly seven year old is enrolled in a gardening class at a beautiful arboretum nearby. Today was the first day of class. For the next several months, he is going to cultivate his own garden of carrots, beets, tomatoes and other miracles of the Earth. He will learn the delicate balance of life through nurturing and dedication. He will dig and compost and tend to 'his' garden along with a dozen other eager children in their gardens. He will learn a few things about the gardening process from a master gardener, and with it, he will learn patience, contrary to the expectations of most modern children. I am hoping this program will help him grow, too, while keeping him forever grounded in character.

When we returned home in the early afternoon, we rode bikes, drew with chalk on the sidewalk, blew bubbles and had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with cold milk. One of the neighborhood kids came over on his bike to recruit my son to play ball on his street, a quiet cul de sac. Seeing my son ride off with such vigor brought a tear of joy to my eye.

My son has had a tough year. At the end of kindergarten, last year, his teacher brought some quirky behavior to my attention. My son had neglected to participate in certain group activities and his class work and homework began to slip. We thought it was behavioral and had been using the 'time out' system as needed. When the teacher called me to say she was concerned that something was going on with him, even he said he was having a hard time and sometimes had pins and needles. It prompted a visit with the doctor, several, in fact. Sadly, we spent most of last summer in doctor offices and hospitals. Beginning with his regular pediatrician, we consulted with a child development specialist and another pediatrician who sent us to a neurologist, who sent us to have an MRI/MRA with sedation. The good news was they couldn't find anything wrong. Everyone concluded my son has above average intelligence, though he is evidently experiencing an emotional development delay.

I observed him closely and noted that he was reluctant to ride a two wheeler, always opting for his little kid bike with training wheels, he threw tantrums easily, he was particular about the texture of his food, was easily distracted, socially a little 'out of tune' and other key signs I was put on alert for.

When he began first grade in the fall, I spoke with the teacher about all we had been trying to figure out. She agreed to monitor him and use a method of positive reinforcement I had suggested. Within a month of the school year, she noticed my son had indeed 'inappropriate' behavior for his age. He refuses to write in his journal, distracts others, refuses to participate in music class, often drops his pencil and has noticeably 'good days and bad days'. She did note, however, that he is an excellent reader, completes his class work (with the exception of journal writing) and is well liked by the other kids.

The teacher called a meeting with myself and a panel of school officials to discuss how she can handle my son's 'special needs' because he evidently responded better to one-on-one learning and that was not possible in a public school classroom of 22 kids and one teacher (her teacher's aid left and was not replaced). They suggested a psychologist and neurologist visit to determine if my son, in fact, is a 'special needs kid' allowing them to provide special services.

My son was excited that I picked him up from school by noontime, being excused for the remainder of the day. I got him a happy meal for lunch and went to speak with the psychologist the school had suggested. He didn't know where we were going; he was just excited to be excused from school, happy meal in hand. During our talk with the psychologist, my son was fidgety and distracted by construction going on outside the window. The psychologist suggested ADHD, though, he said, he wasn't convinced of it and suggested a follow up. The next day, we visited with the school recommended Neurologist. My son was having an average day, and cooperated in all that was asked of him. To my surprise, he diagnosed my son with Asperger's Syndrome. It hit me like a ton of bricks. That explains it, I thought.

Today, as we were driving home from the wholesome, sense-enriching gardening class, my son blurted out, "Mama, the other day at school, we had an assembly. They talked about Autism. Did you know autistic kids are super-sensitive? You could touch them, and they would say 'ouch you pinched me'. They have super-sensitive hearing, too". He paused and added, "I'm not autistic. Do we know anybody who is?"

I had not discussed autism with my son prior to today. When he said that, I said, 'I think you're right. You're not autistic'. He had convinced me from that remarkable statement that he might have some quirks, but that I should not be as quick to label him as the school is.

By simply putting away his video game and going out to garden and play on this remarkable spring day, my son may have sealed his fate, shrugging off the tendency to be autistic. He willingly rode his 'big kid bike' for the first time by

himself (its been sitting in the basement since last summer) and had a great time with it. He convinced me that it just may be possible, that by doing all that is indicative of classic childhood, such as riding bikes, playing ball, hop-scotch, blowing bubbles, getting dirty, eating kid-type foods exploring the neighborhood are simply the best childhood developmental tools.

I think that my son may have been sucked into a vortex of high-pressure marketing from television, the Internet and video games at such an early age that it impeded his childhood development. He's not autistic. He is just a kid that has been missing out on the fundamentals of childhood growth and development. As his parent, I am guilty for letting this happen. I have let him watch more television, Internet and video games than I probably should have.

This week, I attended the 'Virtual World Expo and Conference' in New York. One of the topics was 'Kids and Virtual Worlds'. I listened as leaders of the 'marketing-to-kids' companies spoke about the pros and cons of the virtual world market and kids. I was touched as they mentioned their own kids and the kinds of games they play, but repulsed when I thought of it as a business. I am a realist, and understand business, but there is a strategy of getting kids to buy their products and it angers me.

It angers me because it works. My kids want everything they see on commercials. They're incessant about it. My son has often declined time to play outside for stagnant activity. It is very concerning. They're asking me for overpackaged crap. Not only is it damaging to their character, it is really bad for the Earth. That kind of stuff should be outlawed.

Today, after denouncing my son's autistic diagnosis, and seeing him burst with renewed interest in his own childhood, I am considering organizing an event throughout my town inviting kids K-12 to meet regularly through out the summer where they play (for free) and compete in classic childhood games with kids their age. I want to begin with a letter of intent, and distribute to schools for kids before the end of the school year. I will offer a list of games with their official rules, such as hop-scotch, shuffle board, jump rope styles and songs, skate boarding, stunt biking, etc. and encourage them to practice throughout the summer. I will need volunteers and sponsors with prizes (with the exception of Nickelodeon, thank you anyway, you marketing demon), if anyone is interested, let me know. This kind of thing may actually change the way we interact with our kids, the way they grow, and, with any luck, it will prolong our kids's precious childhood, while reliving our own.