



CHAPTER
1

A Social Problem

Back in 2004, when my wife was pregnant with our first son, Marco, I began to think deeply about his future in 21st-century America. The thought terrified me. I wasn't terrified that he would have an inferior education or live in an unsafe world. I was terrified that he wouldn't have a happy childhood.

Take a moment to think of the 10 best memories of your childhood before high school. Chances are, if you were born at least a few decades ago, most of these memories involve playing outside your house with friends, not scheduled events with adults around. To jog your memory, I'll offer my list from my childhood in the suburbs of Pittsburgh in the 1960s and '70s, not in any particular order:

- 1) Organizing and running a carnival with my friends for a muscular dystrophy charity in the Weisses' backyard
- 2) Playing stickball in the Bruces' backyard with the neighborhood guys every day one summer
- 3) Building a tree house in the woods behind the Allens' house and hanging out there with the guys
- 4) Wading with the Weiss brothers in hip boots down the stream at their farm
- 5) My first hit in Little League baseball, a triple to deep center, after a half-dozen games without swinging the bat at all
- 6) Seeing Pittsburgh Steelers' home games with my dad, especially Franco Harris' immaculate reception in 1972(!!!)
- 7) Golfing with my dad on Sunday mornings
- 8) Pickup softball and tag football in the street next to our house, especially all the weird rules we made up

- 9) Pickup hoops and H-O-R-S-E on the court behind the Morrisons' house
- 10) Kill-the-guy-with-the-ball games, especially the one when the guys conspired to dive and miss me on purpose, fooling me into thinking I had become the next O.J. Simpson

Hopefully, my memories have taken you back in time and helped you remember. Now that you have some great moments in mind, ask yourself, how many of those are possible for your kids today? For most American children, activities that involve play in neighborhoods with no adults around—seven out of these 10—are simply not possible.

You might say, “Of course, times have changed, but the American childhood of today isn’t better or worse. It’s just different.”

Yes, it’s different, but it’s worse, too. A whole lot worse. Sure, we had television and organized sports back then. We just spent a lot less time at them than kids do today. Would I trade all my kill-the-guy-with-the-ball games for youth soccer? Not on your life. One thing we didn’t have back then was a “playdate.” How about building a tree house and hanging out there all summer vs. a dozen “playdates”? Are you kidding?

Because children are having a lot less fun and are dealing with heightened pressures and fears from parents, far more of them are experiencing serious emotional problems. The first sign, anxiety, appears, on average, at the tender age of 6. Behavior disorders start, on average, at 11, and mood disorders (primarily depression) start at 13. An incredible 22.2 percent of teens aged 13 to 18 suffer from mental disorders grave enough to result in “severe impairment and/or distress” (8.3 percent with anxiety disorders, 9.6 percent with behavior disorders, and 11.2 percent with mood disorders).¹

The negative effects of the demise of neighborhood play go far beyond mere lack of fun or happiness. Because kids today spend so much time in front of screens, inhabiting virtual worlds rather than the real one, they lack strong real-world skills like face-to-face conversation or organizing a pickup ball game. Furthermore, because the majority of the time they spend away from virtual worlds is supervised by adults, they’re “other-directed” far more than they are “inner-directed,” to use the terminology of David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*.² In other words, they lack significant capacity to think for themselves. Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist, lamented, in referring to Princeton University students, “They are disconcertingly comfortable

with authority. . . . They’re eager to please, eager to jump through whatever hoops the faculty puts in front of them, eager to conform.”³ Thus, kids of today are far less healthy emotionally, and they have far fewer opportunities to develop social skills, leadership skills, problem-solving skills, independent thinking, and creativity. On top of all that, they’re a heck of a lot fatter than we were.

But this isn’t just about childhood. Free play, as it turns out, is a fundamental building block of a good life throughout the human life span, not just during the childhood years. That’s because “activity oriented toward intrinsic goals, almost by definition, *is play*,” according to research psychologist Peter Gray.⁴ For many psychologists and psychiatrists, a life of intrinsic motivation is the most likely path toward a successful, happy life—a life in which one can have his cake and eat it too, so to speak. You may have heard of euphoric “flow” experiences—intense moments of intrinsic motivation applied toward a goal.⁵ People who are intrinsically motivated do things because they want to, not because someone else expects them to. In general, they accomplish more than people who are motivated by external forces (like bosses and parents)—and they’re healthier and happier, too. By playing freely, children discover intrinsic motivation and “acquire the skills and attitudes required for successful adulthood.”⁶

Indeed, this lack of play in childhood is creating problems for teens and young adults. A wide-ranging study of children’s emotional problems concludes, “Approximately one in every four to five youth in the U.S. meets criteria for a mental disorder with severe impairment across their lifetime.”⁷ More than 11 percent of young adults aged 18-24 in 2001–02 were found to have depressive disorders,⁸ and almost all experts say these problems are increasing over time. A 2008 survey of university psychological counseling center directors reports that 95.7 percent of them believe that psychological problems have been increasing among university students in recent years.⁹

And what about intrinsic motivation? In *The Path to Purpose*, William Damon writes about a quality in teens and young adults (ages 12-22) that is directly related to intrinsic motivation: a sense of purpose in life. Nearly a quarter of his research subjects expressed absolutely no purpose in life at all.¹⁰

Depressing? I’d say so. Actually, I’m angry more than depressed. In general, we have more money than our parents did, but for some reason, collectively as a

society, we've chosen to create worse lives for our kids. That sucks. In fact, I just can't accept it.

That's why I've written this book.

Certainly, I have an awful lot to say about the problem of why children don't play outside in their neighborhoods like they used to. However, this book isn't about pining for the past or whining about the present. There are many books about the problems of contemporary childhood and how parenting techniques are partly to blame.¹¹ I wholeheartedly applaud most of these and cite their research throughout these pages.

This book is different. It's about action, not analysis. It's about what's happening in the real world, every day, not just about studies and reports. I'm a dad who is driven to give his kids a great childhood. I'm very grateful to all the psychologists and academics who have researched detailed aspects of this topic, but we parents who are trying to figure out how to make neighborhood play a fixture in our children's lives don't need any more research.

We need a road map for solving this problem **now**. That's what I promise you here.

But before I present this road map, I need to "frame" the problem I'm trying to solve in a way that makes effective solutions readily available. When we frame a problem, we define it from a certain perspective. Any problem can be framed in multiple ways, but most problem frames don't lead to any useful solutions.

Keep in mind, psychologists and academics can make entire careers (and write dozens of books and articles) out of trying to explain important social problems with framing that doesn't help solve them. In the time that they spend earning nice incomes and tenure but not solving the problems, decades can go by. By that time, our children will have grown up and gone to college!

The problem this book is concerned with is the answer to the fundamental question: "Why don't children engage in free (i.e., unsupervised) play outside?" I call this the "free play problem." If you're a parent, you undoubtedly have a whole set of answers, or problem frames, ready. Trust me, I've heard them all. Here are the ones I hear the most:

Screen Time: "Kids stay inside glued to screens (television, computers, and video games); they don't want to go outside."

Structured Activities: "Upper-middle and middle-class parents fill up their children's schedules too tightly with structured activities like organized sports, so that they have no free time to play on their own."

Working Mothers: "Very few mothers stay at home anymore."

School and Homework: "Getting into a good college is more difficult now than ever, so children need to attend school for more hours, do more homework, and participate in activities that will impress college recruiters."

Stranger Danger: "The world is more dangerous for children, with all those sexual predators lurking, ready to swoop in and take my child."

Unfortunately, for the purpose of getting more children outside playing, none of these is a particularly useful problem frame. For instance, stranger danger is just paralyzing. It's very difficult for people to overcome this fear by confronting it rationally, because the truth is, statistics simply don't support it.¹² It's roughly 40 times more likely that a child will be killed as a passenger in an automobile accident than they will be abducted by a stranger and killed. It's also roughly 1,600 times more likely that a child will be injured as a passenger in an automobile accident than they will be abducted by a stranger at all, regardless of whether the abduction results in an injury or death.

Those ratios boggle the mind. Basically, if you don't let your children roam your neighborhood for fear of child predators, there's no way you should be driving them around to school and activities, either. You should keep them inside at all times. Driving them around to avoid the danger of predators is, in most neighborhoods, *highly* irrational.

Here's another way to look at the irrationality of the "stranger danger" problem frame. The violent crime rate in America—i.e., the number of violent crimes committed per 1 million people—is actually lower now than it was when most parents of today were children themselves.¹³ That's right, parents today who claim that "there's so much more crime these days" actually faced a worse violent crime rate when they were kids.

In her book *Free-Range Kids*,¹⁴ Lenore Skenazy attempts to help parents conquer their fears by making reasoned arguments in two categories: a) the fear is not warranted, since actual statistics show that the dangers parents fear are not greater than they were when these parents were kids who played outside often, and b) the cost of restricting kids' lives out of fear is substantial, and it outweighs the benefits. I do not

believe that parents who are truly fearful will be won over with these rational arguments. As will become clear later, I advocate an approach for solving the free play problem in this book that makes neighborhoods safer in perception and in reality.

The fundamental issue with problem frames 1 through 4 is that they imply individual solutions that directly amend the offending behavior (e.g., “Children are doing something too much, so if they do it less, the problem will go away.”). However, the neighborhood play problem is more a social problem than an aggregation of individual problems.

For example, some parents in recent years have been trying to limit children’s screen time and structured activities, and certainly I agree that parents should do this for their young children. However, using these strategies by themselves will generally not be successful in generating more neighborhood play because it frees up time for the kids who have limits, but it doesn’t get other neighborhood kids outside playing.

Social problems are not solvable by simply telling people to change their individual behavior. Just as we can’t solve a stock market crisis by telling investors, “Stop selling your stocks and start buying!” we can’t solve the neighborhood play problem by telling our kids, “Unplug those electronics gadgets and go outside and play!” Many parents I know have done the latter, and, of course, their kids come running inside complaining that there’s nothing to do outside, that it’s “boring” out there.

In both cases, whether we’re telling investors to “buy stocks!” or we’re telling kids to “go outside and play!” it’s extremely unlikely that large numbers of people would simultaneously take a leap of faith and heed the advice in lockstep, but that would have to happen in order for these proposed solutions to work.¹⁵ Rather than trying to convince lots of people to change their individual behavior simultaneously, it’s better solve a social problem through some sort of coordinated, social solution.

So, in *Playborhood*, although I acknowledge that there is some validity to these individual problem frames, I will emphasize a social framing for the free play problem. The single social factor that I believe, if changed, will lead to more children’s free play is the attractiveness of their neighborhood. I’ll frame the social problem *Playborhood* is aimed at solving as follows: “Neighborhoods rate very low in the minds of children when compared to all the other alternatives to allocate their attention and time.” As a child would say, “Neighborhoods are B-O-R-I-N-G.”

I should explain. A fierce competition for children’s time and attention has emerged in the past few decades. Decades ago, free play in neighborhoods was practically the only option for children looking for something to do. Today, though, children have the Internet, lifelike video games, hundreds of television channels, dozens of new structured activities, and relentless marketing messages that draw them into malls and stores.

In the meantime, neighborhoods have gone backward. They’re actually much less attractive to kids today than they were decades ago. They’re still composed of streets and sidewalks and trees and lawns, but no children are out there. In essence, neighborhoods have been left in the dust. They’re analogous to the 386 PC sitting in your garage, displaced by new powerful computers. Fortunately, as I’ll show throughout this book, neighborhoods are far more “upgradeable” than 386 PCs.