

THE CHILD WITHIN

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

I don't think there is anything more peaceful and therapeutic than watching the waves roll over the sand on a sunny day or sitting on the bank watching a stream meander its way lazily to some unknown destination. This was the case for us last weekend. We attended a craft show and our location backed onto a quiet stream. Usually this stream is unpopulated, but not this time. While the parents sat on the bank, their kids paddled in the water. Since they couldn't see the bottom, walking in the water was more than a little precarious. Jeans got wet and clothes and limbs got plastered with mud. Some kids tried to dam the stream at a narrow point while others chased each other through the water. Some of the older kids caught little craw-daddies in containers and carried them up the bank to show their parents.

A few weeks ago we were in Australia and took the opportunity of checking out Darling Harbor, one of Sydney's most famous tourist spots. As we walked towards the water park it seemed as if at least half of Sydney's school population was there taking advantage of the sunny winter weather. We watched kids trying every which way to go down the slides – frontward, backward, sideways, or in twos and threes.

Our attention was particularly drawn to high-pitched laughter coming from a water fountain. The water was probably ten inches deep and there must have been ten or twelve waterspouts shooting into the air. About twenty kids in their bathing costumes were jumping through the waterspouts, having the time of their lives. In neither of the above situations did we see parents hovering near the edge telling their kids to be careful or not to go in the water. They were all having as much fun as each other – both parents and kids.

It is a less common treat to see kids these days having fun getting dirty, totally soaked, and being adventurous in their unrestricted play. Circumstance has changed the environment to where it has become unsafe and un-cool to do too much physical exercise or to rouse the mental effort to go outside and 'play'. Yet outside activity has many benefits. It encourages good health through fitness, and exposure to elements. Playing helps develop coordination, dexterity, muscular development and strong bones. When playing in teams, kids learn that by supporting one another, they can win the game. Playing creates incentive – something to look forward to. Playing helps kids discover what they are good at.

So how can kids play safely in today's environment? Parental involvement in kids' play provides supervision where necessary, and also creates an

opportunity for that much needed time for families to be together. Parents need to encourage their kids to be daring and take some risks.

Getting hurt is the quickest way to lose confidence so parents should teach kids how to play safely. For example, instead of telling a child that he might fall into the creek if he tries rock hopping, it is far better to supervise the first few attempts, showing the child where it is safe to cross, what kind of footwear he needs, what rock surfaces are safe to walk on, who else may go rock hopping with him, what to do if he accidentally falls in and to be sure he always tells an adult before he sets off.

Kids don't want or need to be overprotected. They want to feel a sense of achievement through mastering activities. Unfortunately some kids don't know anything else but to sit in front of video games, computers, or watch TV. It is time for us all to redeem time for ourselves and with our kids. Lead them by example. They say you are always a child at heart. Get outside and play – release that child within you. You might easily surprise yourself by your own agility!

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.