



Summers Past and Present

Living to tell our kids the tales of our "dangerous" childhoods

By Kelli Wheeler

I actually feel bad for my children.

It's not their fault their generation of parents just isn't comfortable letting kids venture too far from home in search of the cure for summertime boredom.

My kids, ages 6 and 7, have listened with envy to all the thrilling stories of summers past from my own life and their grandparents—where kids could run free without checking in until dusk, swimming was done in waterholes with no adult supervision, risky adventures were hatched out of boredom and we all survived to tell about it.

At night, when oral histories are the favorite request over bedtime books, my children listen in rapt amazement at things we used to experience as kids.

There's Gammy's tale of growing up in the swamps of Pascagoula, escaping the heat and mosquitoes, a passel of brothers, sisters and cousins ranging in age from 6 to 12 at the edge of a water-moccasin-infested swamp. All summer long, they rode that rope swing, perfecting their aim over the submerged roots of a cyprus tree to the sweet spot in the center of the waterhole. It wasn't until a neighborhood kid hung on too long and dropped right into a water-moccasin nest that they realized they'd been flirting with such danger.

And to think I feel like I'm putting my children's lives at risk if I don't

sunscreen them every time they head for the pool.

There's also Grandpa's story of he and his cousin taking their brakeless go-cart up the hill five blocks from Cannery Row in Monterey and hoping for the best on the way down. They would position one lookout on Lighthouse Avenue, the busiest intersection, but as for the other four blocks—well, evasive steering and crashing luckily never had to be tested.

Makes worrying about my son riding his bike to his friend's house down the street seem a little tame.

I spent many childhood summers down at the local creek in Concord. With no air conditioning or pools, my brother and I would troll barefoot through the littered water looking for bottles to recycle, scooping up tadpoles and draping ourselves in moss to look like the creature from the Black Lagoon. We would refresh ourselves in shoulder-deep water only found under the bridge, by now a good mile from home and out of range of the "come when I call you" rule. But we always made sure we were home by dark, the last line in the sand of being busted.

My kids have waded the waters of our local creek in search of tadpoles and adventures. They always come when I call them because I'm right behind them. And everyone's wearing Texas.

My husband also has tales of stretching the limits of the "stay within earshot" rule growing up in Burlingame. He and his buddies would ride their bikes down to the

local canyon and spend the day building forts in the thick brush and trees. Sometimes they'd see how many snapping turtles they could find (people had dumped them in a lake nearby) and sometimes they'd hop the fence of the local golf course to collect balls out of the water hazard to hit around later. He'd always be back by dinner, and whenever his mom asked him what he'd done that day, he'd say, "Not much."

I always know what my kids have done that day because I've usually meticulously planned it for them.

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It's a sad testament of the world we live in today that unless I have orchestrated some safe and sane summer adventure my kids would be restricted to their own front and backyards. A little overprotective? Probably. Could I let them test the boundaries of safety and precaution without consequence? Maybe. Do I have grounds for my concern and paranoia? Definitely.

How about the fact that every time I ride my bike or jog through my

neighborhood, I see cars treat stop signs as optional? How about the sex offender registered under Megan's Law one street over? Or that my kids can't hear me call them over the roar of speeding traffic up and down Arden Way?

I recognize there are two extremes here. Somewhere in between the days of negligent supervision and overprotective parenting is the answer. But until I feel comfortable with the common denominator of my children's maturity and responsibility and suitable summer diversions, I feel best planning their summers and being a part of their fun.

Of course, I still let them get bored so they'll learn how to create their own fun and adventures. But the craziest I've let them get so far is going out of the house at dusk without mosquito repellent.

Kelli Wheeler lives in Arden Oaks and is a mother of two. She can be reached at kellimwheeler@aol.com. Check out her new website at kellimwheeler.com. ●