

Out-Sourcing the Development of Character: A Value-Added Bolt-On?

On the 10th September 2007, as schools all over the country were beginning their new year, a letter to the editor appeared in the Telegraph entitled “Let Our Children Play.” Supported by 270 eminent signatories dedicated to children and education, it drew our attention to two alarming reports: Britain’s children, according to UNICEF are amongst the unhappiest in the developed world and the children’s charity NCH had noted an explosion in children’s clinically diagnosable mental health problems contributing to their discontent. A main cause of this disturbing condition they believed to be, “the marked decline over the last 15 years in children’s play— particularly outdoor, unstructured, loosely supervised play,” which is “vital to children’s all-round health and well-being.” It raised questions about the changes we have allowed to take place in our children’s lives over the last few years and whether we have been otherwise distracted from that responsibility of care.

This clearly has a great deal to do with prep schools, not only in our position of loco parentis but also because children spend so much of their week in our care, following our timetables and engaged in activities of our choosing. The extent to which they are able to develop their play from the free exploration of the early years into a rewarding outdoor education experience as they mature, needs to be part of our educational vision and planning.

There has been sufficient research to support the commonsense view that children need to play, not only for their own personal development but also for their sense of others, their social relationships. Play is a critical process in the development of both brain and muscle fibre. It offers enormous opportunity for quiet absorption, the modelling of actions, attitudes, and routines, a breadth of movement, running, chasing and climbing, while socially nurturing a sense of empathy.

One in three children today never plays outside. Two-thirds of parents are worried about allowing their children outside unaccompanied. A combination of many of life’s modern features has eroded the opportunities for children’s play, reducing at the same time the quality of what does take place.

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There are several reasons for the fact that children play far less and in less constructive ways:

An ever increasing volume of traffic makes areas unsafe.

Concerns about a lack of safety in the neighbourhood because of ‘stranger danger,’ and bullying are growing.

Before the explosion of mobile ‘phone use, young UK teens spent an average of two and a half months of every year staring into screens be they TV, computer, or hand-held games’ consoles, according to the London School of Economics and Political Science (2001).

The rampant “commercialisation of childhood” means that by 18 months they have often begun to identify and “bond” to particular brands. 70% of a group of three year olds could recognise the McDonald’s logo although 50% of them did not know their own surname. Recognising up to 400 particular brands, 78% of ten year olds claim to enjoy shopping as a chosen activity. The impulse to play and the process of identity building has been hijacked by those looking to create devoted consumers.

Education is dominated in both schools and pre-schools by a test-driven curriculum, “substantially taking the place of free, unstructured play.” Even ten years ago, the University of London pointed to a trend in schools of shortening lunch-times and removing afternoon breaks. Teachers noted that children were, “not as constructive in their play as they once were, idling in the playground, squabbling and engaging in aggressive TV-based games. The pressure to achieve improved results” needed a real “increase in the amount of time spent on teaching.”

Prep schools are in an ideal position to provide a lead in this area. We are largely in control of our own destinies. We have the huge advantage, very often of wonderful, sometimes wooded grounds and a rich tradition of generations of children’s independent and creative outdoor play. We have however felt the same pressures as the rest of the sector. While losing confidence in allowing children to develop robustly through the natural processes of

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play, we have confused those processes with an array of controlled “activities” scheduled in the times they might otherwise be playing freely. We have focused on marketing this approach to a target group of parents, defined more recently as customers, even consumers.

A bewildering range of entrepreneurs’ ‘mail-shot’ litters our desks daily with the latest material for improving teaching whilst providing ever more challenging and enriching opportunities guaranteed to set us apart from the competition. The continuing pressure to sell the school as a business means that we have ourselves become consumers of such opportunities, looking to ‘buy in’ expertise.

This trend is clearly adding to the play deficit problem. Outdoor education is a particular aspect of school life which has fallen more and more to out-sourcing, not only of the expert running of activities but also of the responsibility for safety. If one can afford it, who would be the fool not to take it up?

Outdoor activity is risky. But the development of character depends on learning to balance freedom with responsibility. Establishing character has been a defining capacity of prep school education. The sense of identity, pride, self-discipline, honesty and fair play are characteristics formed by a deeply integrated, whole-school process.

At the prep school age children are best led by those who are enthusiastic and wholehearted generalists, those defined by their passion for learning itself, representatives of the school at its heart. It is critical that those, to whom the children look for guidance, and who oversee the broader picture of the child’s development are those prepared to lead them outdoors. Rather than out-sourcing, we need to inspire teachers’ enthusiasm for play and outdoor learning. We need to provide time and space for its exploration and we need to value it as a basic requirement in a modern and balanced education.

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