

Play? What's That?

By Leon Scott Baxter

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It's a beautiful, sunny, summer afternoon here in Santa Barbara. The temperature is in the high 70's. There's a cool breeze blowing from the Pacific. My wife and I have the summer off (we're both teachers), and the girls, Madison and Maya (9 and 4) are on vacation.

I'm at the dining room table finishing my midday salad (no croutons; we ran out) when the doorbell rings. Our doorbell rarely rings unexpectedly. When it does, it's often someone wanting us to buy something, sign something or to tell us something about why our cable/electricity/water (choose one) is being turned off for the next three hours as they service the neighborhood.

My wife answers the door. From the dining room table, I can't see who's at the door, nor can I hear what they are saying. But, I see my wife's eyes widen and a big smile creep across her face as she looks down and nods her head.

By now, I'm curious. "Who is it?" I ask with a piece of lettuce dangling from my lips like a half-smoked Camel in a 1940's movie. My wife looks over her shoulder and yells back down the hall, "Madison, you've got visitors!"

She comes to join me at the table. Whispering, I ask again, "Who is it?"

"Madison's friends from school."

Two girls walk into the house and head to the backyard. I recognize them both. The blonde one has been over at a birthday party. The dark haired one I must have seen at school functions.

"They asked, 'Can Madison play?'" "my wife tells me.

Can Madison play?

I hadn't heard a phrase like that in nearly thirty years. It brought back memories of the summers of my youth. I'd tell my mom I'd be going to Jimmy's house for the afternoon. "Be back before dark," she would respond. And, I'd hop on my bike with the banana seat and the playing cards in the spokes to make it sound like a motorcycle, and ride the five city blocks to Jimmy's (or Spencer's, or Rafael's, or Doug's). "Can Jimmy play?"

The three words that used to unlock a day of fun and adventure, of making up games and getting hot and sweaty and dirty, of Kool-Aid and watermelon, of the possibility of "eating over" and the slim chance of a summer sleepover. "Can Jimmy play?"

Why hadn't I heard these words in so long? Things have changed, or at least our perception of things have. We parents don't feel so comfortable sending our kids out into the neighborhood to find their own summer adventures anymore. June, July and August for the Sponge Bob generation consists of camps, video games, parties at the park, iPods, and playdates. Everything is prearranged, checked, secured and sanitized. No risk. No danger. No adventure.

I'm not advocating that we set our kids free as our parents did us. I am just as guilty of keeping close reins on my girls as well. I, too, perceive the world as a bit more nefarious as it was for the Scooby-Doo generation.

But, I can't help but admit that I felt not only a sense of nostalgia, but of relief to see those girls at our door, having ridden their bikes three blocks so they could ask, "Can Madison play?"

I don't know their parents very well, but well enough to give me the impression that they are responsible people, caring parents, who have their children's well-being at the top of their priority lists.

Am I holding on to my nine-year old a little too tightly? Is she old enough to have the same kinds of experiences I had at her age? Is our world safer than I assume it is post 9/11 and wrought with its Amber Alerts?

I don't know. And, as a father, I'm going to keep my third-grader within arm's reach a little longer (okay, how about "within eye's sight"?). But, knowing that others are feeling comfortable enough to allow more independence gives me hope that maybe our children will get the opportunities to have memories of their summer vacations reminiscent of our... Bikini Bottom meets the Mystery Machine.