Our Kids Just PLAY

Youngsters need free time—to dream, to wonder, to find skills and interests of their own

BY JEAN R. KOMAIKO

AT a recent dinner party I found the ladies deep in chatter about children—this time about children and lessons, children and camp, children and summer in general. For an hour they held forth on music for monotones, the high cost of dancing lessons and what makes Sammy run the wrong way when the Camp Hobo bus pulls into sight.

Said my hostess, "Jean, you haven't told us about your children! What will they do this summer?" Said I: "Just play!"

I gather "just playing" is out of date. If you love your offspring, you don't just let him grow. You *do something* to, with and for him. The something may range from French lessons to finger painting or it may—through July and August—include eight weeks of organized outdoors.

I'm evidently as unstylish as a backside bustle, but the fact remains that aside from a weekly 26¼ hours of school in winter and a few chores in summer, my children are unfettered as to time and untutored as to talent. And it doesn't worry me a bit. I know that with or without lessons they will never replace a Menuhin or a Picasso, but with or without organized classes they will eventually dance and play tennis. Therefore, I can sit back with considerable pride in the simple fact that these two young people show so much promise in the great art of Play. I'm not being facetious. I honestly believe all children learn more from unsupervised play than from all the extra-curricular goings-on.

I should mention that my children are city mice, and that free play is far more difficult hemmed in by alleys, busy streets and rattling elevated trains. Like other parents I'm frequently tempted to free myself by filling their hours with organized activities—particularly now that these long months of summer are here. But each time I prepare to enroll Bill in the bassoon or Debby in day camp, I get the uncomfortable feeling that I'm about to choose the easier way for *me,* not necessarily the better way for *them.*

In homes where a parent is sick, a mother works or a child is too much alone, organized play is wonderful. But I'm in none of these categories and my children really need free time to let down from the organized life of the school months. Even when they were preschool age I felt this way; for then, too, summer provided a let-go time when routine was relaxed.

How do you keep kids happy and busy for ten weeks? Answer: They're not always happy and they're not always busy. But since they can be neither of those things all the time anywhere, I simply do the best I can. It goes like this.

Part of my job as family camp director, recreation leader, play instigator and program planner is to see that we have the right toys and play materials around. This goes for the winter months as well as the summer ones. I've learned, for instance, that there are two kinds of toys: those flashy ones that are wound up, run for a week and are forgotten, and those that last through the years and can be used in various ways at various ages and stages. A city child is limited as to space, both inside and out, so I choose the kind of toy that needs more imagination than space. Blocks, for example, are perfect for a child of three and can be used in entirely new ways by a child of eight. Dishes, pots and pans once used for high tea with dolls, can later be used to serve live friends. Games, books, records are all high on my list of props. Probably the best and most play-stimulating gift my children ever received was a beautiful box given by their grandmother. It contained every type of paper, paints, chalk, pipe cleaners, scissors and so on. It gave hundreds of hours of creative fun to my children and all their friends. This year Bill (*Continued on page* 89)

OUR KIDS JUST PLAY

(Continued from page 44)

received another box, filled this time with a variety of wood left-overs gleaned at no cost from the lumber-yard. Along with a hammer, a pail of nails and a fairly blunt saw, this gift has enabled him to fashion every-thing from swords to jets that fly "on imagination." Many of my friends have old boxes full of cast-off shoes, clothes and junk jewelry, and their children dress up for play fashion shows and amateur theatricals.

Choosing toys that stimulate a child's fancy is vital. But so is a willingness to lend a hand with suggestions and a readiness to answer questions. At our house the questions flow all day, everyday. "Will this grapefruit seed really grow?" "If alcohol expands with heat, why doesn't water?" "If Mary Martin is really Peter Pan why doesn't she wear a hat like the boy in the book?"

I learned early that it's worth the time you take to search for answers, to help with experiments, for out of this curiosity comes more play and often lifelong interest.

I've learned, too, the importance of providing new experiences. Often a trip to the zoo, a boat ride, a visit to a factory, the fire or police station provides material for many hours of future play. Most jaunts of this type require little money. I remember a mother of twelve children telling me that each Sunday she and a different one of her brood would set off to explore a new part of the city with nothing but carfare. "We always had fun," she said, "and we always came home with a new experience to share with the rest of the kids."

WE prefer to invest the energy and money many families give to camp and lessons in this type of outing. Last summer, for instance, we couldn't take a real vacation, but we did spend a number of days in small side trips. One was a hot-day jaunt on an air-conditioned streamliner to Milwaukee—for no other reason than the children had never been on a real train. Today, having dinner on a diner, talking to a porter or shouting, "All aboard that's going aboard," is part of their experience and play.

Not long ago, I found Bill perched on a dresser in his bedroom closet. With a ball of twine, a cardboard box and a hand-rigged pulley he had concocted an elevator. Happy as a lark, he "lifted" anyone who walked in and called his floor.

It's amazing how a recalled experience, a recollection of how the elevator cage looked and what the starter said, can stimulate a desire to duplicate. Certainly it would be ridiculous to say that riding "make believe" elevators or visiting firehouses could fill up July and August for stay-at-home children. But these things do help. It helps, too, to find out which friends will be around—and free—for the summer.

(Continued on page 90)

OUR KIDS JUST PLAY

(*Continued from page* 89)

Generally there are a few children within walking distance who are seeking compatible companionship. If you take inventory before school ends, you can usually round up half a dozen blind man's buffers, "statues" players, pairs of puppeteers or hopscotchers.

Last summer, though, the pickings were pretty scarce. With few children available, I realized I'd better find out what the community had to offer. There was plenty.

1. A wonderful waterfront program. Instruction in swimming, boating, skiing and dozens of landlubber games. Cost—$5 a child. 2. A crafts program, run in many city parks by the Park Department. 3. The YWCA, YMCA, the Jewish Community Centers and other church and community groups with swimming programs, city tours and outing days arranged. 4. A summer reading club at public library as well as a weekly story session. (Many libraries have special groups for very small children.) 5. Two-week day camps run by the Scouts. 6. Special summer programs for children run by the Art Institute and several museums.

We happen to live in a very large city so the facilities are almost limitless. But it's likely that your school or park district, your Y or church group offers similarly good recreation facilities for your children. Almost all communities have public pools, reservoirs or parks to provide a day's fun.

Summer's the time we phone and make dates with old friends who live too far away for comradeship the rest of the year. Perhaps once a week we pack kids, toys, lunch, swim trunks (for taking advantage of lawn sprinklers) into the car and head for long-lost acquaintances. From summer to summer many changes take place. The Smiths are in a wonderful new house or Johnny has acquired an English bulldog or Susie has grown five inches taller and ten degrees sweeter. A year's absence doesn't always make children's hearts grow fonder, so to insure a peaceful and pleasant day we generally plan a joint enterprise: a picnic in which all can help, a ride in the car for ice cream from a roadside wagon, a treasure hunt for earthworms and four-leaf clovers.

Summer is also the season of circuses, ball games, county fairs, corn-husking contests, music or plays or dancing or sailing boats or playing jacks in the city parks. Farms sport their best finery and woods their richest bloom. If you don't have too far to travel by bus or car, if you don't try to cram too much into any excursion and if you're armed against mosquitoes and showers, these can be happy and memorable events.

THE POST OFFICE has divided 106 cities into postal delivery zones to speed mail delivery. Be sure to include zone number when writing to these cities; be sure to include your zone number in your return address—after the city, before the state.

A good part of the trick of meeting summer cheerily lies in the parents' attitude. There are times when the chatter and clatter at our house subside and my husband checks the neighborhood in search of the children. Where are they? Behind closed doors, pursuing their own interests alone. This "hermit play" worries too many mothers—quite unnecessarily. A child who seeks time for himself may be rebuilding needed energy or doing some valuable thinking.

I've watched my children sit for hours on the beach grinding colored stones into powder. I've seen Bill and his friends, together yet alone, stretched out under a shade tree on a hot summer day, saying nothing. Purposeless? Idle? Sure, but to me these hours of quiet non-activity are part of the poetry of childhood, as necessary to growth as vitamins or vegetables. These moments give our children a chance to ponder the age-old questions: Who am I? What am I?

There are times, of course, when no one wants the beach or the zoo, when daydreams won't do and tempers flare. I've tried at those moments to remember the high spots of my own childhood summers. "How about making ice cream," I'll say, "or freezing popsicles in the refrigerator?" A homemade lemonade stand can keep Bill a happy salesman for an afternoon. He drinks off most of his profits and he learns a good deal about the giving habits of most of the neighborhood.

We've also had a summer institution known as the "late night" when children are permitted to do that wonderful thing—stay up till they drop over. Once a year, it's a glorious thing to get one's fill of TV and popcorn, to flop into bed long after the gayest teen-ager on the block has been escorted home.

The extra hours of summer light permit time for a busy father to take kids fishing—or just looking—at the end of a city pier or to explore the banks of a winding river. Our children wait breathlessly for the fireflies to light up so they can corral them into jars. And sometimes a cool ride nowhere-in-particular takes the curse off all our tensions.

When the school year begins each September, I look back on our summers with contentment. Why, I ask myself, was I so worried about giving the children enough to do? Why did I fret about lack of plans? Somehow the time flies by on the lazy soft summer clouds and my children

are as fit and fat, as tan and peppy as any of their friends whose summers have been far more organized.

Some of my friends go to extremes, giving their children too much organized activity too early, and in the process they make life too easy, thereby stifling the natural curiosity which drives a child in search of his own knowledge. There is an amusing, if wicked anecdote, which illustrates this phenomenon. It's about the small boy who looked out of his window and spotted another boy climbing a tree with great dexterity. Impressed, he rushed out to congratulate the performer.

"Say," he shouted, "you're good at that! Who's your tree-climbing teacher?"

Must children be *taught* to play? Not my kids!

A SPECIAL SCHOOL

(*Continued from page* 41)

association, you can get it for $1.00 from NARC. Grouped by states, practically every residential facility for the retarded is listed—plus a few day schools. Under each listing is information such as the size of the school, types and ages accepted, fees, number and professions of staff members. The "Directory for Exceptional Children," published by *Porter Sargent,* 11 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts ($2.20), should be available in your local library. In the *Sargent* listings nothing is told about the professions of staff members but there is usually some information not in the AAMD directory about curriculum, program or activities. But listing is just that, not endorsement. You'll have to make your own evaluations.

Let's assume that you're using the AAMD directory. You'll rule out any school into whose categories "types accepted" and "ages" your child doesn't fit. If your child has particular health needs, look for "resident physician." "Attending physician" is only acceptable for the regular medical supervision desirable even for children in the best of health. "Physician on call" means that a doctor comes only when someone who is not a doctor decides he might be needed.

Look to see how long a school has been in existence. Although a new school may be excellent or an older school's former high standards may have deteriorated, by and large the fact of a school's existence over a long period is evidence that it must satisfy many parents. "Licensed" may mean much, little or nothing. There may be a fine, unlicensed school in a state which doesn't require licensing. Some states license if nothing more than sanitary and fire requirements are met. In states where several agencies are empowered to license, a license may have been obtained from the one whose requirements were easiest.

Don't be discouraged if you're beset by if's, and's and but's while you're trying to make even a preliminary

(*Continued on page* 92)