Review Articles

Child's Play: Rediscovering the Joy of Play in our Families and Communities

Silken Laumann. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2006, pp. 312.
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Silken Laumann speaks from her heart while sharing her vision for healthy children in the world. Chapters include The Dream, which sets the stage of hope and reflection; The Value of Play outlines valuable outcomes of children's play; The Bad News gets to the heart of children's health issues; Family Play reinforces the value of families who play together; The Sports We Want challenges communities to deconstruct existing programs to create the ideal; Active Schools demands excellent teaching for the mind and the body; Champions in Our Communities praises the unselfish initiatives of individuals who make life better for others; Sports for Peace takes us to places in the world that have experienced the value of sports; Dreaming into Action outlines the influences and successes of the Silken Laumann's Active Kids Movement and Boys on Bikes demonstrates how Play Days in the Park can grow into wonderful community experiences of togetherness and reach the fulfillment of a dream.

Silken Laumann has a wonderful dream she shares in her book, *Child's Play*. She dreams of neighborhood communities where children, as active members of society are free to play, explore, roam, and interact with their environments, once again becoming visible on playgrounds, sidewalks, streets, and in driveways in front of their homes. She dreams of the sounds of road-hockey, kick-the-can and dodge-ball, rhythmic skipping, swishing basketballs, bicycles whirring by, and the thwacking of a soccer ball, joyful laughter and boisterous shouting as children engage in healthy playing in outdoor neighborhoods.

She did not see herself as a social activist when this dream began. As an individual who values the joys and benefits of a healthy lifestyle and as a concerned parent, she realized her vision would demand social change, beginning with the belief that what is, is not good enough. Laumann could not accept still, physically inactive children and quiet neighborhoods and from this non-acceptance the Silken Laumann Active Kids Movement (SLKM) was born.

SLKM is a national charity founded on the principles of getting kids active and embracing the power of play. It focuses on five key elements required to engage people in action: Inspiration, Education, Activation, Connection and Celebration (p. 236) which are designed to help people take action in their communities. SLKM does not prescribe the way; rather it acts as a support to foster the creative ideas of individuals looking to make a difference and improve life for children, families, and communities. It extends into any creative healthy initiative from nutrition programs to community activity nights. SLKM is gaining momentum and the goal is to win the race for all children and their health.

Laumann's memories of childhood embrace the sounds of noisy streets filled with children playing outside for endless hours, exploring neighborhoods, parks and playgrounds without fear; providing a sense of civic ownership. Today, she observes one critical difference: neighborhoods have become silent.

Neighborhoods have become lonely, quiet places where children have seemingly disappeared overnight.

She agrees our world has changed and many of our streets are no longer safe places to play. This explanation, while logical, is not acceptable; depriving children of play, the life-blood of childhood, in places that rightfully should be theirs. Laumann began to dream about affecting change to create neighborhoods that are once again safe, inviting places for children to develop physically, emotionally and spiritually through activity. Her dream includes parents, neighbors, schools, whole communities, the world, and all its children.

Children develop memories of childhood through play. Playing outside with their parents also develops memories of parenting that remain long after childhood is over. Playing with your kids is being with your kids. Holding hands with your children and feeling the joys of play are gifts. Play brings joy to the child who experiences it. The joy of leaping, spinning, swinging, jumping, running, and creating imaginary play objects such as rafts and forts are tangible experiences that, although, immeasurable scientifically, exist and are the essence of movement that children intuitively experience through play. She affirms that memories are made through play in ways that will never be duplicated through “playing” video games, chatting on MSN or watching television. Organized sport, although valued, does not replace the freedom children experience when they are allowed to create and referee their own games. Independent, neighborhood play teaches many skills: fair play; positive interactions with others; making connections between friends, which in turn, draws the parents of the friends together and creates a more positive community, one that is safe, trusting and valued. Play unites people through a common experience, is vital to good mental health, is craved by the body, and ultimately feeds the spirit.

Laumann is over-whelmed by the deteriorating health of our children. Obesity is rampant and chubby, winded kids are hiding indoors, playing video games, computer, and watching television. The differences between their bodies and children a generation ago are the linked to a “stillness of living” (p. 7). Chronic adult diseases are of pediatric origin and many of these diseases are attributed to inactivity.

Laumann emphasizes that the solution to obesity begins at home. She refers to research pointing out family behaviors consistent with overweight children such as families not eating meals together and multiple televisions in the home.

She suggests that parents, while attempting to provide every opportunity for their children, neglect their fundamental responsibility of fostering good physical health and well-being for their children. Parents, as role models, should become active with their children, rather than over-scheduling them in organized activities and allowing themselves to be sidelined by coaches who may be their volunteer neighbor.

Families have the most impact in shaping the attitudes and values of their children as children imitate observed behavior. Laumann encourages parents to teach their children to skip, ride a bicycle or catch a ball, assisting both parents and children in leaving behind the busyness and worries of the day. This teaches children to value play and what it means to share in family time. She sheds light on the challenges of contemporary parenting and is sympathetic and supportive

of all the combinations that exist in families today. She encourages parents to recognize they might be the most qualified people to play with their children.

She urges parents to break the unbearable pace of life and take time to be with their kids, building families and communities. When parents are active with their children, children learn to be active. She provides examples of engaging communities in activity through play by offering to supervise her neighborhood kids at the park, or setting aside Wednesday as family and community-play time. Working with neighbors to discover ways that kids can play together will recreate her childhood scenario of the “collective eye” (p. 104) where kids playing outside were watched by no one in particular, yet were watched by everyone.

She masterfully provides practical ways to transport children from the screen towards active play, counter negative child responses to activity, meet the unique needs of children through activity, keep activity fun through positive experiences, and cautions against putting adult expectations on children’s play. Included are detailed ideas of games and activities for families to play, including rules and variations of the activities as well as several other resources.

Laumann offers sound advice concerning parents’ desires to raise champion kids through quality play, both organized and free. She assures parents that a child starting soccer two years behind other children will and can still reach their full potential. She relates the fact that most of the competitors on her rowing team were not “athletic” (p. 111) until their high school years. She provides a chronological overview of the developmental stages of children, including the psychomotor, cognitive, and affective windows of opportunities to maximize potential, and encourages parents to attend to appropriate activities for their kids. A discussion on the positive attributes of organized sports is layered within these developmental stages. Ultimately, communities need to ensure sport programs that exist reflect the values the community wants to share. She encourages communities to deconstruct the meaning of their sports programs and recognize that sport, as a human construct can and should be shaped to support positive outcomes for all participants.

She emphatically discusses the lack of quality physical education programs within our schools and stresses the importance of hiring qualified physical educators. She applauds excellent teachers who “help children discover their own excellence” (p. 152); epitomizing the goals we want for our children as they grow through play. She advises that schools must become accountable for quality physical education programs. Working together as parents, teachers and administrators to positively affect the health of our children, we cannot attend to the academic side of children, while ignoring their bodies.

She beautifully outlines a tragic, yet wonderful journey outlining the phenomenal outcomes sport provides for underprivileged children around the world. Her experiences from the corners of refugee camps in Africa, to the northern tip of the Yukon, describe children of the world coming together, redefining culture, and breaking racial barriers through sports play. Entire paradigm shifts have occurred through programs involving volunteers and participants who simply want to make their communities happier and healthier places to live.

Silken’s dream is coming to life through the vision of others who also believe that change is possible and good things come from those who play with good

ideas and dream simple, yet powerful dreams. She is inspired by the success stories of ordinary world citizens achieving extraordinary results through small changes in their communities for the good of all children.

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