

## Chapter X: Idle Parenting

Some social scientists say the antidote to helicopter parenting is cutting back:

“In the past 20 years or so, parenting has taken on this crazy emotional investment, popularly referred to as helicopter parenting, in which children are at the centre of their parents’ lives,” Dr [Robin] Simon said. “Our parents wouldn’t have dreamed of spending so much time with their kids.”

Parents spend three times as many hours on activities with their children as they did a generation ago, according to research published this spring by Oriel Sullivan, a sociologist at the University of Oxford. Educated mothers put in most time...

[E]conomist Bryan Caplan, from George Mason University... has a simple solution: back off. “If you enjoy reading with your children, wonderful. But if you skip the nightly book, you’re not stunting their intelligence, ruining their chances for college or dooming them to a dead-end job.”<sup>1</sup>

Cutting back a bit sounds like great advice. But Tom Hodgkinson, a popular British parenting columnist, is the anti-helicopter parent. He writes, “My idea of childcare is a large field. At one side of the field is a marquee with a bar serving local ales. This is where the parents gather. On the other side of the field, somewhere in the distance, the children play.”<sup>2</sup> Idle parenting adherents “pledge to leave our children alone.”

Hodgkinson’s 2010 book *The Idle Parent: Why Laid-Back Parents Raise Happier and Healthier Kids* offers many reasons why lazy parents make the best parents: “kids and adults alike need to play more and work less. We put far too much effort into parenting. If we leave our kids alone, they will become more self-reliant and we’ll be able to lie in bed for longer.”<sup>3</sup>

His “Idle Parent Manifesto” praises parental laziness, leaving kids alone, anti-consumerism, reading poems and stories, listening to music, playing and having fun, thrift, creativity, “happy messes,” parental alcohol consumption (yay!), lazing in bed, playing in nature, getting kids out of the way when they’re in your way, and working less (esp. when kids are small). His Manifesto also opposes school, health/safety guidelines, and “wasting” money taking vacations and day trips.

Hodgkinson’s an extremist, denying his kids video games and trying to keep them even from watching television. He believes every toy since the stick has been a step in the wrong direction: “Kids

don't need much: two sticks tied together make a sword. Make a rasping noise with a blade of grass. The child who knows how to play is self-sufficient; he or she is happy anywhere. No electricity needed, or money, leading to less work for the adult. ...The hunt for non-stop distractions crushes the independent spirit. Children can conjure whole worlds from their imagination. Sadly, that imagination will be killed by an overload of digital entertainment.”<sup>4</sup>

Hodgkinson says we're crazy to drive our kids to soccer practices, baseball games, etc. He despises organized sports' effect on children and says serving as taxi drivers drives parents mad:

there is something moronic and pointless about team sports, with the possible exception of cricket. No one seems to enjoy the process, it's just the winning that counts... Team sports give off an unpleasant whiff of aggressive competitiveness. The playing fields of Eton turn into the race of life in the capitalist world... How many mothers and fathers have I met who complain about having to drive their children to sports fixtures on Saturdays and Sundays, when they would rather be in the pub or asleep? ...What the sports on my approved list have in common is that they are self-organised, rather than organised from above. But please, please, spare me heartiness, spare me cheering and the Olympic ideal, spare me vicarious competitiveness, whereby the children's victories are seen as a reflection on the parents.<sup>5</sup>

Hodgkinson embraces his philosophy too fully. What's the harm in letting kids play some quality video games and watch some quality television programs? My 5-year-old son has learned a lot about the natural world watching children's shows about nature, like *Wild Kratts*, that proved gateway drugs into adult nature programs (*NOVA* and *Nature*). Did you know sauropod “coprolites” – fossilized dinosaur poop – are several feet in diameter and weigh hundreds of pounds?<sup>6</sup> My kids learned that from *Dinosaur Train*. Of course, kids can learn about nature by engrossing themselves in it. But most species and habitats are inaccessible to kids.

My son watched a show about a man trekking 700 miles to the South Pole and another in which a man went thousands of feet underwater in a handmade submarine to observe six-gill sharks that haven't changed much since the Jurassic era. He watched a *NOVA* special about an archaeological dig in Snowmass, Colorado that uncovered many mastodons and solved the mystery of how they died: an earthquake briefly liquified the watery sand they were standing on, causing their legs to sink down until the earthquake stopped, when they found their legs hopelessly entombed in solid ground.<sup>7</sup> He watched penguins, polar bears and African safaris and saw scientists dissect a lion, a tiger, and a giant python. He learned about the extinct dire wolf and how they differed from and were outcompeted by much smaller grey wolves from a show that used computers to simulate what dire wolves were like. He

watched a show that captured what raccoons do late at night when no one's watching and another on coral reefs just north of Hawaii. He watched – on *Jonathan Bird's Blue World* – bizarre camouflaged and venomous fish, amazingly clever mangrove seeds, sea turtle sex (jealous males swarm and bite the lucky male), and scuba diving through massive flooded underground Mexican caves. And in the middle of a show on various whale species, he saw a 9-foot-long whale penis! (Now *that's* a harpoon! I naively thought “Thar she blows!” was about whales expelling CO<sub>2</sub> from their blowholes.)

None of this can be learned poking around a neighborhood park. We once took our kids on a whale watch, but the whales kept their private parts private. (The whale show also showed a pack of killer whales drown a baby whale, something else you're unlikely to see on a whale watch. I shielded our 2-year-old from that, but our 5-year-old has learned that some animals attack and eat other animals. I shield him from human and even cartoon violence, but nature isn't all butterflies and bunny rabbits. Lions and sharks have sharp teeth for a reason.) If you deny children television *and* travel, as Hodgkinson does, how can they learn about Earth's magnificence?

I'm an extremist in my love of and lifetime consumption of books, but certain subjects are best learned through video, especially when you're young and have little background in the subject. Quality television – on science, history, nature, etc. – can stimulate new interests children, and adults, can pursue further via books.

Besides, not letting kids watch TV seems an inherent contradiction of idle parenting and its principle of leaving kids alone. What could be more hands-off than letting your kids watch TV? Many parents let kids watch TV when they need a parenting break. I think that's great, if kids are watching quality TV, which includes almost anything on *PBS Kids*. Also, if you want to inspire kids to be creative and imaginative, TV can be a great aid. My kids sometimes do pretend play based on TV show characters like Bob the Builder, Martin and Chris Kratt... even dinosaur species. It's hard to do pretend play about triceratops unless you know what triceratops looked like, what they ate, and how they behaved.

Hodgkinson also despises public schools as mind-numbing, independence-crushing drudgery machines while lamenting that “Intellectual loafing centres such as Westminster or Eton are not an option for most of us. In any case, who wants to slave all the hours that God gives to send our children

to private school?”<sup>8</sup> While I also cringe at most schools’ cliques, conformity and pervasive mediocrity, I believe school serves as an important crucible where children learn to get along with others. Hodgkinson sees school only as a place that fails to teach children to think academic thoughts:

What do Bertrand Russell, William Blake, John Ruskin, William Cobbett and John Stuart Mill have in common? The answer is that they never went to school.... It is to this lack of formal education that the historian E.P Thompson attributes Morris’s revolutionary brilliance: somehow, he slipped through the brainwashing net and became a passionate enemy of Victorian competitive values....

Robert Louis Stevenson was of the view that “full, vivid, instructive hours of truantry” were a better education than sitting in a classroom having information drummed into your mind by Gradgrinds intent on producing obedient wage slaves.

I am certain that most of my education happened when I was on my own, reading, or staring out of the window, thinking. ...[T]he way to get an education is to go out and experience life and read books. That’s it.<sup>9</sup>

But when children raised by “home-schooling anarchists” eventually headed to school, they were woefully unprepared to deal with society:

Cokie Roberts repeatedly pressed my mother about our socialization. To gain independence and prepare children for the realities of adulthood, didn’t they need to be with their peers and suffer all the harsh experiences that entails?

...“I was very green, and a few days into school this kid pushed me so hard I fell over a desk,” John remembers. “I just couldn’t understand. Why would a kid want to fight me? At home, James and I were like two peas in a pod.”

At my schoolyard, James, in third grade, was instantly picked on. Within the first week, he recalls, “an older kid kicked me in the butt really hard. The other boys were laughing. A girl finally told me someone put a ‘kick me’ sign on my back. I never heard of that, teasing and pranks.” James was also taken to the back of the bus and “punched incessantly” for the better part of grade school. “Oh, God, it was awful.” James never told my parents. He just “took it.” Was Cokie Roberts right? James thinks so. “I wasn’t around kids,” he says. “The four of us were never threatened, so I didn’t learn how to stick up for myself.”<sup>10</sup>

Idle parenting offers some good ideas, especially as an antidote to helicopter parenting. But I see no proof its grab bag of parenting principles produces superior children. The great minds Hodgkinson praises may have avoided school, but they did not become brilliant by searching meadows for four-leaf clovers and drawing in the dirt with sticks. They were raised by armies of private tutors – the most privileged private school experience imaginable.