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On Parenting

Why the suburbs are all wrong for my kids

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By Erin Mantz

“LOOK. AT. THE. DEER!” I say this to my sons, 11 and 14, as we do our normal weeknight swing down the tree-lined driveway, home from what feels like their 10th basketball practice of the week. But my boys are buried in their iPhones, watching for their friends’ reactions/likes/comments on one of whatever social media apps of the moment.

Amazing things are going on around them – I mean, I am *floored*, every time, by seeing the deer just calmly hanging out a few feet away, staring right at me, not even running away from our car. But unlike many parents, I don’t think it’s social media that has led to my kids’ indifference. I’ve firmly decided to place the much of the blame squarely on the suburbs. Yes – having my kids grow up in the beautiful, sheltered, suburban world of the suburbs of Maryland is the problem.

I grew up in Chicago, in a vibrant neighborhood where noise was my friend and nobody drove me anywhere. Sounds were all around me, and I walked everywhere, myself, alone. I fell asleep to the din of the Lunt Avenue buses outside my bedroom window, and the chatter of the second-floor neighbors talking with my mom because the windows were open. I woke up to the scent of blueberry muffins baking at Swiss Pastry across the

alleyway, and the clanks of the first morning's game of Kick the Can. From the moment I woke up, I was never lonely or bored. Sounds and people enticed me to go out and explore. Everything was outside, awaiting me.

I felt connected to all the neighborhood kids, shops, workers – even the caretaker of the pond at our beloved Indian Boundary Park, which was just a baseball's throw away. It was at that pond that I saw my first turtle and discovered how they move and feel.

And that's what I'm afraid my boys don't have by living in the suburbs. That feeling of being connected. I bet my boys have never stolen or felt a turtle. They've probably watched animal tricks on the Internet, and have likely Googled "turtles" when they needed to learn about them for a school project. My younger son does know the neighborhood kids, but my older one is always out at some structured activity or sports practice he gets to by car.

They don't have the kind of life where they can walk themselves to activities and chat with store owners along the way. They don't have to figure out bus numbers and routes or try new things on their own. The suburbs: The planned community where everything is available, by car. With a schedule. With parents in charge.

Sometimes, at night, as I look out our big living room window at the woods behind our house. It's pretty, but unnerving. It's too quiet. I'm looking for some activity – even the deer – and waiting for something to happen. The suburbs, with all of their supposed security and conveniences, book clubs for moms and hectic sports leagues for kids, are pretty lonely.

Do my kids feel the loneliness of the suburbs? I don't think so. I think it feels like their haven, their home. It's all they've ever known. But when my son has an urgent request for candy or a protractor for homework, the need will pass that night, unfulfilled, unless he can persuade me to drive him to CVS. If we lived in a neighborhood like the one I grew up in, he could walk to the drugstore to get it himself. He'd learn responsibility, independence and redefine initiative.

And as for me, the mom in the suburbs: Sometimes I just don't feel like driving over to Starbucks to meet a friend for coffee. I yearn for the way it was when I grew up, in that three-story apartment in West Rogers Park, where our French windows stayed open all the time, and my mom could yell up to her friend on the second floor, to come have an iced tea. It's not just that I'm a mother who wants it to be like it was "back in my day." I wish for my kids to experience some of the kind of childhood and independence I gained from living in the city.

It's not just helicopter parenting, structured play dates and social media that have made their lives seemingly easier, or perhaps if not easier, lazier. It's living in the burbs. I want my boys to experience how the little things in everyday life don't always come so easy. I remember my mom searching for a parking spot on the street, carrying groceries way farther than across a porch, of trusting me to walk alone every day, make friends with the drugstore owner and actually talk to strangers.

I'm not saying that I wish I was a mom carrying groceries for blocks and blocks. I think that's what I wanted to avoid when we first moved to the suburbs. I wanted the ease and convenience of a driveway, a front porch. But now all I feel is an anemic lifestyle. Car to gym to home to school to home to work to office to store to home again. Then the evening carpools start. For the kids, and I guess, for me, there's no grit, no problem-solving necessary to get from Point A to Point B. And that's what I'm afraid my children aren't learning by living in this supposed utopia — a way of life that fosters self-reliance and problem-solving.

Why not just leave? Well, I can't ... literally and logistically. Legally, I'm divorced and couldn't go even if I wanted to. But even if I could go, I wouldn't want to uproot my boys now, to take them away from their dad, school and sports teams, and this neighborhood they consider home. They're living their version of childhood, and they think this suburban one is just fine. But will they one day look back on this childhood with a misty eye, like I think of mine? Will I?

The irony is, I created this situation. As much as I loved my childhood as a kid, once I was in my 20s, I envisioned having kids of my own and giving them a "nicer" and safer life. I wanted to grow up and get a comfortable house for my family with the extras that I never had. A real rec room. A yard. Space.

I got married. I got the big house. I gave them a back yard and better schools and safer streets. The idea that all the stability I thought suburban life would bring them, and me, seems almost silly now.

I am restless here, and now there's a longing for what I've lost, and for what they'll never have – the buzz outside the windows, the sense of being part of something you don't have to pay or try out for to join, expressions on real faces when they share exciting news with friends, not emojis from miles away.

I'd gladly give back their hoverboard and Xbox, Instagram accounts and carpools for a place and time that's more of the childhood I had. Some would argue I had less. But I was happy. And decades later, sounds of the city still comfort me. Even when I don't hear them, I can remember.

What will my sons remember? I don't think it will be a sense of excitement, wondering who is outside, or which random people they will meet on their walk to school. They won't learn how to make nice with shopkeepers or smell the bakery as they walk past. But perhaps they'll remember the safety and predictability of the suburbs. And for them, if not me, maybe that's enough.

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