



The Empty Backyards

By: John Regan, Morven Park's Athletic Fields Complex Manager

On a teacher workday last fall, my wife asked me to go for a tire rotation and check in on our kids during the day. I got up early, left the car at Costco, and decided to get some exercise. The forecast was for 75 degrees and sunshine, so I took a walk in a nearby neighborhood. As I proceeded on my morning walk, I was passed by a few joggers, said hello to several dog walkers, and saw a couple bicyclists.

After about an hour I started to realize there was something missing – there were no children out playing in the backyards or outside at all. There might be some families out of town with the extra day off school, but there were no kids to be found. Are all the kids still asleep at noon, or are they all at daycare? There were plenty of cars in the driveways, so my curiosity grew as to where all the children were in the neighborhood.

I got a clearer picture of what might be happening when I returned home and discovered my own boys and a group of friends were glued to the NBA Live Xbox game. My wife said they had been at it for a couple hours. When I brought to their attention it was a beautiful day outside, and maybe they could go play some real basketball, one friend of my youngest replied “this is more fun.”



This “fun with the thumb” generation has many choices for how to spend their time and going outside to play has slipped down the list of exciting things to do. I can't blame children for being consumed with the power of technology. There is no debating Netflix, I-phones, and gaming systems all engage the mind and can provide entertainment, but the sad reality is that there is a growing number of kids who prefer playing on devices instead of playing a real game or activity that involves movement. We might one day look back and realize this pattern of inactivity will result in early onset health concerns. We need a call to action to get kids moving again.

I might be dating myself, but life was a little simpler when we only had three TV channels. If there was ever a day off from school, you had two options. Sit inside and watch soap operas or go outside and play. You could find most of the children in a neighborhood running around or riding their bike on the streets. While it might seem astonishing to the kids of today, I can assure you the backyards of neighborhoods were once crowded. In fact, forcing me to stay inside was my parent's go-to form of punishment.



There was little to do inside when I was growing up. “Go to your room, John” would not have had such a powerful impact if I had a Playstation, smartphone, or my own video collection. The opposite is true today and some children might even view going outside or playing a sport as a form of punishment.

I believe we are in the beginning stages of a technology epidemic and the consequences will be devastating to the health of our children. We need to get them to unplug and get outside. To exercise and engage with other people, of their own age and face-to-face. If your child's best friends are their devices or gaming systems, I urge you to intervene now. Here are a few simple steps you can take as a parent to help get your child out of a technology rut:

- Take the opportunity to “unplug” the whole family and get outside at least 3 times each week for 20 minutes or more.

- Monitor the amount of gaming time spent each day and require regular “activity” breaks to get your kid out of their room and off the couch. If you are industrious you can make the activity a chore, like unloading the dishwasher, taking out the garbage, walking the dog, etc.
- Encourage reading a book (preferably a paperback or hard copy, but an e-reader will do in a pinch) for 20-30 minutes a few times a week. Kids have so much “required reading” for school that they miss out on the pleasure of simply reading for fun.
- If they aren’t already, sign your child up for an organized sport or healthy activity. If you don’t think a competitive or travel program would be your kids cup of tea, that’s fine, get them into Tae Kwan Do, Ultimate Frisbee or teen yoga. There’s so much to do beyond youth sports leagues, but often parents forget that there are other options for mental and physical fitness.

I hope you’ll consider a few of my suggestions and at the very least have a talk with your kids about the importance of activities outside of gaming and electronic devices. My hope is that on my future walks I will once again see the backyards of Loudoun County full of children and teens.