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HEADLINE: Boys Gone Mild

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BODY:

I remember we called it "play." It occurred on weekends and after school, when the grown-ups weren't around. Sometimes it hurt. It hurt when the ball struck someone in the face. It hurt when the thing we were climbing -- the tree, the fire escape, the face of the sandstone cliff beside the river -- suddenly grew slippery or broke. But those were mere physical injuries. They healed, often after trips to the emergency room. The injuries that lingered were the emotional ones, incurred when someone came in last in one of the contests we dreamed up. And, being boys (girls were simply not part of our thinking), we made contests out of everything, from walking, balance-beam style, down the railroad tracks to collecting crawfish from the creek.

Who knew at the time (not we children, certainly, growing up more than 30 years ago in small-town Minnesota) that playing and getting hurt would come to be regarded later on as exotic, threatened activities sorely in need of a cultural revival led by concerned adults? But that is just what's happening, judging by the popularity of the recently published "Dangerous Book for Boys," a runaway best seller that seeks to reintroduce young males to lost pastimes like making paper airplanes, hunting rabbits and skipping stones.

The worry behind this growing movement to mandate diversions that once were voluntary is that the fun has been taken out of fun. To the arbiters of wholesome recreation, today's fun is too passive, too controlled and much too automated. Video games though spectacularly violent in ways that the 9-year-olds of yesteryear could never have imagined are deemed an inferior play form by these experts because they expose children to no real risks and demand of them no metabolically measurable effort. A kid with an Xbox can blow up the planet, but he can't scrape his knee or even grow short of breath. A stone-skipper, though, might fall into a pond, forcing one of his resourceful buddies to snap a branch off a nearby maple tree and hold it out to him before he drowns.

Thus does parental protectiveness come full circle, with the deliberate promotion of character-building childhood mishaps. By pushing that baby-on-board overboard -- particularly if that baby was born a male -- we can encourage him, the thinking goes, to develop emotional sea legs. That's the hidden redemptive promise behind the appeal of the "The Dangerous Book for Boys" and the rise of play-positive organizations like the Alliance for Childhood: It's not too late to raise a scrapper, even if he grew up eating organic and riding to Montessori school in a Volvo.

The perceived, and feared, alternative is rearing a programmed, thin-skinned nonentity. For fathers who grew up skipping stones -- and who occasionally hauled off and pelted one another with stones -- this can be a gnawing anxiety. Sure, the wife was probably right to enroll little Tim in yoga class as an

early stress-reduction measure, and yes, it's a fact of hectic modern life that play dates need to be scheduled eight days in advance, but what good will any of this do if the lad's budding masculine soul is starved of the key emotional nutrients that only chaotic goofing off supplies?

The answer: Pump Junior full of joy, the improvised, unplanned, slightly hazardous joy that Dad remembers so fondly from his own youth. Or does he remember it fondly? I'm not sure I do. On my forehead, over my right eye, is a scar left behind by a game that had no name that I played when I was 7. It was exactly the sort of rough-and-tumble, unsupervised eruption of high spirits that the new play authorities might endorse. It involved baseball bats, a big tin can and no discernible rules. The result was sheets of blood and a cracked skull. The sound of the impact caused laughter, I recall, but the bleeding sent my pals running to their tree forts and left me alone in the middle of someone's yard walking in circles, temporarily blind.

According to the wisdom of the day, the wound was my fault because I had played too rough, and playing too rough was not thought of as a virtue then but more of a troubling inevitability, like catching the chickenpox. If my father took any satisfaction in the wonderful boisterousness of my male nature, it didn't survive the presentation of the bill for the stitches my cut required. Today, when I rub the bump above my eyebrow, I like to think it bred a certain toughness -- or at least the appearance of a certain toughness -- but I have never found myself wishing a similar injury upon my 5-year-old son, Charlie. I would rather that his head remain unfractured, even if that means his psyche remains unchallenged.

This isn't the same as endorsing the spread of detachment and inertia among boys. I'm as romantic as any middle-aged man about the formative pummelings of my playground days. I just don't want to systematize them in the name of reinstating healthy childhood spontaneity. The essence of what we called play, as I recall, was not danger but the fact that it came unprescribed. Quite often, as in the case of swinging baseball bats at one another's unprotected bodies, our idea of amusement was even warned against.

Play that is good for kids, and presented as such -- by best-selling authors, by teams of experts, by parents -- doesn't strike me as all that playful. It sounds like eating your peas. It sounds like the stuff that my small-town pals and I used to gather at the railroad tracks and bash one another with rocks instead of doing. We, too, were beset from on high by caring know-it-alls who thought they had identified what was best for us. I remember they called it "finishing your homework."

But at least they didn't pretend that it was "fun."

"Muscular exercise and fresh air are necessary to the child to promote growth and development of all the vital organs, the brain included. If the motor centres are not well developed, the adult becomes an impractical dreamer." John Tyler, biology professor, Amherst College, in *The New York Times*, Sept. 2, 1906

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GRAPHIC: Photo (Photograph by Reuben Cox) Chart: "ROUGH AND TUMBLE"

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