

**LET
THEM
BE KIDS**



LET THEM BE KIDS

*Adventure, Boredom, Innocence,
and Other Gifts Children Need*

JESSICA SMARTT



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Dad,

Ever since I can remember, you've brightened the room with your eternal optimism and passion for life. You are the world's best dad, a faithful encourager, and an amazing Grampy.

Mom,

Home has always been where you are. Thank you for bearing my many worries and constantly pointing me to Jesus.

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Let Them Be Kids: A Manifesto

We believe in childhood, in letting kids be little and awkward and snuggly and free. We believe in family, that we always have one another and that wherever we are is home. We believe in adventure and that the Good Life is more thrilling, more satisfying, more sidesplitting fun than the cheap imitations. We believe in imagination—in great books on rainy days, in long car trips with goofy entertainment—and that the good stuff happens after you set down your phone. We believe in blowing bubbles, building forts, chasing fireflies, and playing dress-up. We believe that boredom is often the beginning of something wonderful. We think puzzles, board games, hard work, and opening the door for someone should never go out of style. We believe being kind matters more than being cool, and developing character is more than winning. We know that innocence and purity are still worth fighting for. We believe in “I’m sorry” and “I’ll always love you.” It’s not an easy thing to build a childhood. But in the long run? It’s worth it—for all of us.





CHAPTER ONE

WHY CHILDHOOD MATTERS

When I was eleven years old, ten of us cousins reunited for a glorious week at Uncle Joe's lake house. The first afternoon we meandered unsupervised out to the dock to dip our toes in the water, when we noticed something magnificent. Off to one side was a giant piece of wood that had washed up on the rocky beach. It was huge—bigger than we were. The possibilities sprawled out before us like a game of Pick Up Sticks on the carpet, with the most obvious being that we had just discovered a ship. We didn't bother to get approval from the grown-ups (who I now realize were inside drinking their coffee and watching with amusement). Instead, we got busy preparing to launch our new boat.

First, we had to assemble provisions. We snuck a sleeve of sal-tine crackers and a few snack-sized boxes of raisins out of the pantry, along with juice boxes. We also needed oars. This was harder than we thought, because we had to get the right kind of sticks that were

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strong enough to do the job but not so big that we would hit the oarsmen behind us.

Then it got sticky because we had to choose the passengers. This meant sorting the big kids from the little kids, and there were always those few in the middle who were questionable. I don't remember where the line was drawn, but I do remember that it ended in a fight and someone "accidentally" getting drenched in lake water. Last of all, our noble vessel needed a name. Only one was suggested; we agreed unanimously. *The Majestic*. She was beautiful, after all.

That was twenty-seven years ago.

When I look back at this glorious memory, it captures so many things that are wonderful about childhood: things such as freedom, risk, imagination, adventure, creativity, nature, friendship, and innocence. Was it dangerous to set sail on uncharted waters aboard discarded, rotting, and barely attached two-by-fours? You bet it was. That made it even better.

Likely you have your own similar-sounding childhood adventure. The thing is, the bits and pieces that make up a childhood are more than stories; *they form character*. Once a human being arrives at adulthood, many core values and traits are statistically unlikely to change in later life.¹ Of course, change is always possible. But here are a few things that tend to be fixed after arriving at adulthood:

1. Character traits, such as patience, kindness, integrity, self-discipline, and the ability to follow rules²
2. Habits, such as work ethic, technology use or misuse, and time management
3. Skills and abilities, such as intellectual curiosity, proficiency in music or foreign languages, reading aptitude, and the ability to communicate well in written or spoken word³

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4. Presence of faith / view of God⁴
5. Sexual health, in the sense that habits and choices have already been made to affect one's lifelong sexual behavior and happiness⁵
6. Attachment to others / ability to have healthy relationships

Again, change is absolutely possible; there are wonderfully inspirational stories of people who, in their thirties through their eighties, are reframing their personal narratives and growing in profound ways. But these people will likely tell you that the change was not without tremendous exertion. It's hard to overcome a difficult childhood. A healthy childhood, on the contrary, is a balm and a gift. Read over the list again. Character, good habits, faith, relational health—childhood is the box these gifts come in. These are the things we wish for the children we love.

It's not just a cute or trendy idea to save childhood. When we gift our kids childhood (the space and nurture to grow in a healthy way), *we are in fact changing history*. We are helping to develop human beings who are brave and self-sacrificing and have integrity, who appreciate and care for the earth, who defend the rights of the weak, who have been loved and are able to love, who've developed the intellectual focus to forge new territories in medicine and engineering and politics, who have soaked up the good old books and written some new ones, and who can lead countries and companies and families.

When we save childhood, we are literally shaping the next generation.



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For years I have loved the words *let them be kids*, so it was a no-brainer to use those words as the title of this book. But as the ideas started forming themselves into stories and chapters, I realized I needed to offer some perspective for the title and a little bit of explanation. The best way I can do that is to tell you about our garden.

We are epic failures at gardening. Aside from that one summer it rained every day at 4:30 p.m. for twenty-two minutes like a heavenly sprinkler system, producing vines and vines of beautiful, delicious tomatoes, we barely *ever* produce a respectable crop. Every year I think, *This is the last year! We are never doing a garden again.* I know what I'm saying is not very on-trend, but I am telling you, we are horrible gardeners. We start out strong: we take the family trip to Lowe's, we pick out our favorite plants, we till up the soil and plant those puppies in the raised bed in the backyard. And we water it . . . *for about a week.*

Then life takes over, and it becomes too much to keep a garden alive. Once in a while I'll suddenly remember it. My son will be midbite in his bowl of oatmeal, and I'll yell, "Go water the garden!" and he'll scurry out the door. And then nothing for long stretches of time. Every third Sunday my husband will weed and pick out a few peppers, but generally we do nothing. We plant it and just let it be a garden. We let it be.

As it turns out, you can't just plant a garden and let it be. Turns out if that's all you do, the bugs eat your cucumbers, and your tomato vines get all shrively and crusty looking. Then when you look out the window at the garden, you feel this angsty sort of guilt because instead of growing a beautiful and bountiful harvest, you've slacked your way into an embarrassing and guilt-producing hobby.

That's what happens when you just plant a garden and let it be a garden. Do you know where I'm going with this?

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Back to *let them be kids*, that phrase I love so much. It makes me think about climbing trees, reading good books, and the tender waiting by the washing machine for a beloved stuffed friend to come out clean and warm. It's remembrances of draping sheets and cushions every which way to make an epic living room fort and getting chased around the house by a daddy tickle-monster. It gets me choked up to think about what a gift my own childhood was. And it excites me now to think about allowing my kids to be carefree and wild. Kids should be kids!

But I'll shoot it to you straight. To let them be kids isn't simply disengaging; it costs something, often something resembling a whole stinking lot of work. You might get sweaty and dirty, your muscles might ache, but, most importantly, you can't forget about it for a single day because it needs food and water to grow. It is a whole thing.

So when I proclaim, "Let them be kids!" it is mostly *not* passive. It is *not* an exhausted resigning of duties, a last-gasp, fizzling at the end of day, free-range, unsupervised, "Oh, what the heck . . ." free-for-all. To let them be kids, we must be adults. When we let them be kids, we are the gardeners working faithfully so childhood can grow. And our work is worth it.

As I type this at the kitchen table, the three most precious things in the whole world to me are upstairs. One is rocking in the old gray chair, feet dangling, reading a novel. One is fully dressed up in doctor gear, preparing her tools for this afternoon's appointments. And one is building a climbing wall out of LEGOs. "Do you want to come up and see it, Mom?" he asks with sweet excitement.

This is a book about making space for LEGO creations, stuffed-animal doctor visits, and afternoons of careless reading. It's about saving time for family and making homemade bike ramps in the front yard. It's about the awkward school photos, cul-de-sac games of baseball, and mud soup on the sidewalk. It's about preserving

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make-believe and mistakes, board games and dressing like Spider-Man to go to the grocery store. This is a book about preserving childhood. Let them be kids.

I'm so glad you've joined me on this journey as we remember what we loved most about childhood and dream about how to give the very best gifts to our own kids. You'll notice that this book has a unique setup. I cover ten "gifts of childhood." Instead of one long, rambling chapter for each gift, I've divided them into a few shorter essays.

If Life Is a Garden, Then Study Your Plants

I have yet to manage a successful garden. Honestly, it seems totally overwhelming to keep thirty-six little plants alive when it takes so much energy to keep my own three children alive. But I am slowly growing in my understanding of botany through indoor potted plants purchased at Trader Joe's.

Here's how it went down. I walked in, and beautiful little green things in very Joanna Gaines-looking pots beckoned me, saying, "Take us home! You won't kill us. We're easy." Given my track record with gardening, the odds were stacked against these poor guys. And not surprisingly, I have killed half a dozen or so.

Then there was the Plant That Changed Everything. My mother-in-law gave me a clipping of her Swedish ivy vine, claiming it was "trouble free." I quickly became attached to the little meandering vine with round leaves. Originally, this plant's great-grandmother lived in the White House with President John F. Kennedy! Can you believe it? My mother-in-law had been passed down clippings from a friend, and then I got more clippings. John F. Kennedy's plant's granddaughter was doing okay for a good long while, and then . . . the telltale signs. Brown leaves. Yellowish hue. Leaves drooping. I was killing another one!

This loss wasn't going to be okay. I was tired of walking past my sad, unhealthy plants feeling like a Bad Plant Mother. The mishandling of houseplants under my watch was going to end. I did what any modern, self-respecting woman would do. I got on my laptop and googled "How do you keep houseplants alive?" and "Why are my plants dying?"

What I realized is that I had been going through the motions with my houseplants, doing things that I thought plants needed. But as it turns out, plants are persnickety. You actually have to pay attention to them individually, looking at the leaves and soil,

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noticing what each one needs, and watching how each responds to its environment. During this research, I learned what the rest of you probably already know: overwatering is the leading cause of death of houseplants. I learned to identify the signs of overwatering but also the signs of insufficient watering and how to tell if the plant doesn't have enough drainage.

And then I started watching my plants. Really paying attention and adjusting my care accordingly.

I realized that I had been mindlessly dumping water. In fact, the plant on the piano was sitting in an inch of water! The two in the bedroom were not getting nearly enough sun. One plant's roots were exposed, another needed a different pot, and so on and so on. The fascinating thing was that even some of the same species—the ones whose care you *thought* you could predict—needed different kinds of care.

In just a few days I began to see the fruits of my labors. It was incredibly satisfying. Instead of seeing sorry, limp plants that were losing leaves by the week, I saw happy little plants with bright green foliage.

The parallel was not lost on me.

If a simple houseplant flourishes with individualized care and attention, how much more do our children?



This book includes many of the essential ingredients to grow healthy kids: the water, light, and fertilizers of childhood. But children, like plants, are particular. They need watching. You can't assume that what worked for the first one will work for the next. And most importantly, you can't just bring them home, plop them down, and go on with your business.

I had to toss one of my houseplant casualties in the trash yesterday. It didn't make it. But that's okay; no big deal. We will all

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move on. Children, on the other hand, matter immensely. These infinitely complex human beings have been gifted to us to steward and nurture. The stakes are extremely high. Our calling to care for them is one of the greatest we will ever receive in this life.

As you read through the stories and tips, remember two things:

1. **It is an incredible honor to care for your children, a deep and (I believe) God-given calling with eternal ramifications.** I can guess that you are tuned in to the seriousness of this calling since you bothered to pick up a book like this. You're doing step one already, so pat yourself on the back. You are giving child-raising the appropriate honor and virtue it deserves and doing so in the face of a culture that can make you feel as if there are a million other things more or as equally important. But you get it. Way to go, you!
2. **You must watch your children and be willing to totally change things up.** Here's an analogy. I homeschool our kids. Do you know how many homeschooling philosophies there are? Hundreds! You can be a classical, traditional, Charlotte Mason, "unschooling," or Montessori homeschooler, just to name a very few. Between you and me, I don't even know what some of those words mean. For a good half a year I legit thought that Charlotte Mason had something to do with Mason jars. Turns out she's a person (RIP, Charlotte Mason). I have always thought it was a little silly to irrevocably commit to one of these philosophies. How do you know all of your kids will thrive with this or that particular formula? How do you know your children's needs will not change? How do you know (*gasp!*) that one day you may not scrap the whole thing and send them to school?

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I have tried to hold my theories and practices loosely. And to regularly evaluate each child and see what he or she needs for the next season. I ask you to do the same. The goal isn't a philosophy. It's being able to walk by all your plants and your children and see them flourishing because you've paid attention to their individual needs.

I believe what I say in this book is truth, but it is not formula. The good news is, so much of parenting can be learned. I was bad at plants, and now I am not-so-bad. We can pay attention and learn and grow and become good caretakers of the plants and the children who live in our houses. It just takes some effort and not being afraid to get our hands dirty.

How to Not Hate Me When You're Reading This Book and How It Can Best Help You

I know without a shadow of a doubt that the words in this book are true. I believe in this message. But I also know that it doesn't matter as much whether these words are true as whether they become true for you. Whether they *feel like* they can be true for you.

A mom I follow on social media will post every so often about her wonderful (-ly annoying) tradition in which her kids work together to tidy the house at the end of the day. It's hard to put into words what these posts do to me.

At first, I feel disbelief. What kind of a ten-year-old boy smiles like that while he vacuums? Then I feel embarrassed, remembering the last time I asked someone to vacuum; I might just as easily have asked them to scoop up five pounds of sugar, granule by granule. Then, if I'm being totally honest, I start feeling a little mad at this mom. Does she think she's better than us because her kids enjoy scrubbing toilets? She does! She's proud! The nerve! At the tail end of all these feelings comes plain old discouragement. I am a failure at making my kids clean. Sigh. And I return to my uncleaned house with even more self-doubt and loneliness.

All of this negativity is terribly misplaced, and, of course, it's wrong of me. This mom is doing a wonderful thing. She is proud of herself, and she should be proud of herself. Her cleaning tradition took a lot of work and time and patience, and her kids have learned an extremely laudable skill. One that it would behoove mine to learn as well.

But it hurts to be reminded of something you're not doing very well. Some of us are not good at certain parts of parenting. Some of us have gotten into habits, ones that we kind of know are negative ones, but we think our kids will not respond well to change.

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This is crucial. If you read this book cover to cover and all you let it do is reaffirm you in the things you are already doing, then, quite honestly, you should have used the time and money you spent on something else, like decluttering your attic and buying an overpriced drink at Starbucks. See, the real value comes when we grow in areas in which we are weak. And the real treasure is that we *can* grow in areas in which we are weak.

Last week I saw my Insta-hero bragging sharing about her end-of-day cleaning successes, and for once I changed the story and let her words inspire me to action. I started by speaking to myself instead of listening to myself. Instead of bemoaning and judging, I made myself say, “I could do that too.”

When I woke up the next morning, I had a chance to put this new thing into practice. As it turned out, I needed help. I had 729 things to do and no good reason why my three able-bodied children couldn't help me knock some of those things off the list. I sat them down and shared my heart—which is a modern way of saying I was honest with them that I was dog-tired and overwhelmed at all the things we needed to do before our beach vacation. I told them we were a family, and families help one another. I wrote out a list of specific chores they each had to do. And then I followed through and held them accountable. Oh, but this is the worst part. We were all novices at this, so I had to overlook some growling, break up some arguments, teach someone how to make a bed correctly, hug and encourage and scold and remind. It was hard work, but at the end of it I had a clean house (not altogether notable) but also something else (extremely notable): *I had children who had grown in a skill that they desperately needed to grow in.* The satisfaction from this was immense.

I am about to share a lot of ideas in these pages. Some will be completely foreign to you and yours, and it will feel as laughable and obnoxious as the kid with the vacuum on social media. You

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may find themes that make your skin prickle and your eyes roll—things that make you want to shut the book and make fun of me. *Don't*. Not because I am afraid of that but because that anger sensation signals an opportunity for growth.

My anger at the Instagram mom was actually my own deep-down gut telling me that my kids *could* fold their own laundry and that they should not run outside to be swinging or fighting on the swing set while I'm overwhelmed with household chores. In the same way, any negative feelings you experience may be your gut telling you that a change needs to happen in your home. Sometimes when we feel a vague or not-so-vague sense of anger at someone else, it is because we want to make a change.

As you read, if something pricks at you and you want to disregard it, first ask yourself this question: *Do I want to make a change in this area?* Strip the emotions out of it. Answer honestly: Do you want a change? If so, here is what I advise:

- **Do something immediately.** I learned this from Cindy Rollins, who says if mothers worry that they're not doing something they should be doing, "Get up right now and do that thing. . . . Once we took a nature walk in a raging storm to quell the frustration in my heart at our lack of nature walks."⁶ My tendency is to throw a weeklong pity party / analysis paralysis and then make a giant twenty-seven-step plan to fix what needs fixed. Perhaps we are better suited to just immediately put the thing into action in a small, real-life way. Kids haven't played outside in a while? Turn off the TV and make everyone go on a bike ride.
- **Be honest and forthcoming with your kids even if it means explaining that you were wrong.** Explain your new way of thinking. Apologize for the past. Tell them it will be hard for you too.

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- **Be the parent.** I confess to you that sometimes I have this inexplicable difficulty making my kids do undesirable things like fold a load of towels. It's just way easier to let them keep jumping on the trampoline or whatever. I probably need counseling to figure out where that's all coming from, but I so often have to remind myself, "Don't be afraid. *You are the mom.* You know they need to do this. Be the parent."
- **Don't be afraid of resistance.** Building character in kids is work. It is painful sometimes, like listening to kids read aloud for those first few months or disentangling an argument and procuring an apology. It's returning stolen items to a friend and apologizing to the mom, helping someone re-mop a floor that was clearly dry under the chairs, sitting at home with a punished child when it would have been far easier to do the fun thing. You're not alone, and you may yet feel that deep-down confidence (sometimes very, very deep down) that you have done the right thing.
- **Remember that no one is starting from a blank slate.** I mean, maybe one or two of you in the cosmos are. And if you're one of them, we need to pause right now and give you the accolades you deserve. Yes, if you are reading this on some cozy (quiet) sofa, pregnant or not-yet-pregnant with your first child, soak in this moment. You can't see us, but we are all standing up, across states and years, saluting you right now for being an A+ proactive visionary of a (future) parent. Because you, my one-in-a-million friend, are doing what most of us did not do. The majority of moms reading (as well as the one writing) have *already begun* our habits over years, even decades of actual parenting choices. And what that means is that we have done some things right, and we have done some things wrong—or rather *are doing* some things well and some things not so well.

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It is a myth, dear reader, to believe that we read these types of books from the architectural blueprint stage of parenthood. More often we have already built a large part of the house, and we are living in it. People are already eating dinner in the breakfast nook and sleeping in the (unfinished) bedrooms; there are lights flickering and appliances humming. And we look at the plywood and say, I should have built that wall a little differently. I should have chosen a different material there, or that part of the house is really not doing what it needs to be doing. The beauty of it is, *we can make changes*. We aren't living in immovable, eternally permanent, cement-wall, cinder block homes. We can do the work to straighten the crooked walls, level out the windowsills, rip up the crappy carpet, and install the new hardwoods we know we need. We can make changes in our homes.

It's Not Too Late for You

One of my living heroes is Tricia Goyer. First of all, to date, she's written seventy-two books. To date I have written exactly one and a half books, and I have whined loudly the whole time, scraping up the deep-down rudiments of my inner core to finish each painful chapter. Tricia is clearly a superstar in this element.

She is also a rock star mom. Although I know she'd grimace at that title, here is why I know it's true. She and her husband were past the baby-raising, carpooling, dirty-dishes stage of life. Her kids had all been successfully ushered into adulthood, and as parents they'd reached the stage where they were ready to relax and surely deserved to. But *instead!* Instead of reveling in newfound freedom, Tricia and her husband began again. They fostered then adopted several sibling groups. By the time it was all said and done, they added a second batch of seven older kids to the Goyer name, many of whom came carrying a tremendous amount of hurt and pain. These were children who likely had not received a childhood like the one I am idealizing in this book.

What I find encouraging and fascinating is both that these kids were able to grow, mature, and heal and how this healing came about. Tricia chose to homeschool the kids because her time with them was so short and because she wanted them to experience the blessings of home as much as they could. What did this time look like? The kids spent their school days being read to, cooking in the kitchen, playing outside, riding their bikes, and traveling together. She speaks of how the kids balked at first but eventually came to cherish this time. I don't want to simplify the story or the ending. I am sure that healing and transition after adoption can be a terribly difficult and long road. But the point I want to highlight here is that, in a way, these kids were able to

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“back up” and enjoy the innocent elements of childhood. I suspect they *needed* to, in order to heal.⁷

Most of us are not raising children who carry a past with profound levels of trauma. (Although some of us are, and to those of you, I say a prayer that you feel the strength for this incredible job. You have my deep respect.) But while many of us are not raising children who experienced complex trauma, none of us have unvarnished children with perfect habits.

We have children for whom we wish we could do this differently or that differently. We have kids who have seen things we wish they hadn't seen or know things we wish they didn't know. We have kids who have developed habits we wish they hadn't developed. We may be tempted to feel we are reading some of this too late to help.

Thankfully, this is not true.

Even if you are reading this as a thirtysomething grown-up, it is not too late for *you* to change. It is not too late for you to have adventures, to break unhealthy technology habits, to resurrect play and imagination, to return balance and manners and faith to your life. *And if it is not too late for you, it is certainly not too late for them.*

This is because three things are true.

1. We can learn, or relearn, how to enjoy simple pleasures.
2. We can build new habits.
3. Innocence can be restored.

For instance, kids who have been addicted to video games can become unaddicted and instead learn to love being outside. Kids who never enjoyed children's classics such as *Little House on the Prairie* or *The Boxcar Children* can learn to read them and

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enjoy them. Even kids who don't have grit or manners can learn either—or both.

There is hope for childhood. Not in the abstract, blank slate of future children but in *your* children, the ones in your home.

As you read, promise me that you will not lose hope. The virtues you read about here are powerful and real and worth fighting to regain. Do not despair. Change is possible.



CHAPTER TWO

THE GIFT OF ADVENTURE

*Bringing Back Skinned Knees,
Secret Forts, and Yard Games*

When I was in college, I volunteered my time to be a Young Life leader for high school kids. You need to know that this was totally out of character for me. Why? Because Young Life leaders tend to be crazy, fun, confident, adventurous, joy-filled sorts of people. None of those words would have described College Freshman Jessica. Mostly, I was this timid, reserved, sheltered, private-school perfectionist type. Suddenly I was thrust into a whole new world of laughter, crazy skits, loud and unruly public-school ninth graders, and the most fun I had ever had in my entire life. Being a Young Life leader was the best decision I've ever made. It gave me my husband, a big dose of confidence, great memories,

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and just about all of my closest friends. And it reminded me what the Good Life is.

The organization of Young Life anchors their mission in a Bible verse found in John 10:10, where Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Here’s what that anchor verse meant for us who were Young Life leaders back in western Pennsylvania in 2006: We wanted to show kids the Good Life. The really Good Life. We wanted to show them that the ways they were trying to find life and fun and happiness were not fulfilling them, but that they *could* find fulfillment in discovering that they were made by a Creator for a purpose.

The high school where we served was filled with troubled kids who had been drinking themselves into stupors, performing sexual acts in closets, and overdosing on OTC meds to numb the pain of abusive dads. Some had lost moms to cancer and others had caught their parents in affairs. We invited them to join us and through some whacky events showed them real, honest-to-goodness fun. We did crazy things like sing “Sweet Home Alabama” at the top of our lungs. We stuffed marshmallows into our mouths and sang the alphabet. They watched us dress up like redneck lumberjacks, sumo wrestlers, pocket-protector-wearing nerds, and country hobos. We danced around the stage like absolute crazy people, and they laughed until tears ran down their faces. We made them wrap toilet paper around themselves and hang Christmas ornaments on their ears. We made them square dance to mountain bluegrass music. We made them climb mountains and whitewater raft and get up at 5:00 a.m. to watch the sunrise.

As Young Life leaders we didn’t invent the good stuff. No, we just spent hours praying that Jesus would fill us with his joy, then we held these kids’ hands, brought them to the cliff, and showed them—with bated breath—what the Good Life could be.

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When I say that kids today need adventure, it's not a side point or a peripheral idea. It's not that I needed a chapter and thought up some superfluous content to fluff up the book. No, I've included adventure, and actually put it first, because it is essential. Adventure, built into the Good Life, is actually the basis for this book. It also encapsulates our family's mission.

Your kids need to see the Good Life. They need to have lived it, breathed it, and tasted it. They need to climb the mountains, see the views, experience the sweaty foreheads and skinned-up knees from a bona fide, heart-racing adventure. The world throws so much crap at them. Imitation fun. Phony entertainment. Fake joy. The world not only throws it at them but kids are eating it up hook, line, and sinker. Depression and anxiety are at sky-high, unprecedented levels. While kids have access to higher levels of entertainment than any prior generation, they are far more bored and dissatisfied. They are the most technologically connected generation ever, but they report more loneliness.

For one example, a sobering 2019 *New York Times* article revealed that children today are more depressed than they were during the Great Depression and more anxious than they were at the height of the Cold War. Think about that for a moment; it's a staggering statistic. The article cites a study published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*:

Between 2009 and 2017, rates of depression rose by more than sixty percent among those ages fourteen to seventeen, and forty-seven percent among those ages twelve to thirteen. This isn't just a matter of increased diagnoses. The number of children and teenagers who were seen in emergency rooms with suicidal thoughts or having attempted suicide doubled between 2007 and 2015.

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The article concludes, “To put it simply, our kids are not O.K.”¹

Childhood is oh-so-short. These precious years should be the time to fill them to the brim with all the excitement and joy life has to offer, instead of compounding the problem with early introductions to mental illness and unhappiness.

I do get that these eighteen years can drag on terribly (sleepless baby nights and middle school hormones—I’m looking at you). I want you to understand that I am not rocketing out of bed like, “What kind of adventure can we go on today, kids?” It’s not the face of our home; it’s more like the skeleton, underneath and deep down, giving shape to things.

We mate the socks and watch *Wheel of Fortune* and eat turkey sandwiches and do other boring life things other people do. But underneath it all, my husband and I yearn to show our children the Good Life. In the following pages I’m going to unpack a few qualities of the adventurous Good Life. Though there may be more, I’ve identified five.

1. risk and independence
2. laughter
3. nature
4. challenge and success
5. newness

Each one of these will help offer your child a chance to experience the gift of adventure, but not just your kids; I think you’re going to enjoy them as well.

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Risk and Independence

Kids need to experience thrill, and they will, one way or another. You can either provide the space and example for healthy outlets, or they will find it in other ways. While all kids need it, some require more than others. If you're familiar with the Enneagram personality types, you'll know that as an Enneagram six, my core emotion is fear, which causes me to spend large amounts of time and energy fleeing real or perceived dangers. I'm not what you would technically call a thrill seeker. I say this so you will take my personal examples of risk taking with a large granule of salt and not laugh too terribly hard at my expense.

When I was in college, some of my friends had a tradition that involved plastic reindeer decorations, the kind people place in their yards to spruce them up for Christmas. We would drive into town at night, and when we spotted a yard with reindeer, the guys would jump out of the car, run into the yard, and position the reindeer into amusing arrangements. Then they would sprint back to the car to get the heck out of Dodge. I'll leave it to your imagination to visualize what kinds of positions college guys would invent for plastic reindeer. (Mom and Dad, listen to me. I promise I was never directly responsible for the reindeer maneuvering. I was only the driver!) The thrill that this sheltered eighteen-year-old college girl got out of being the getaway driver for such unseemly activities was immense.

I'm not holding this activity up as the pinnacle of community service exactly, but as far as Potential Misbehaviors for College Kids, I would say it classifies as fairly benign.

College was full of these kinds of adventures. One Friday night my friend Katie and I snuck into our guy friends' dorm rooms and did outrageous things like make their beds (oh, the craziness!). We left them cryptic notes, stole their ramen noodles, and interviewed

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their roommates. I will say that my husband's list of "adventures I had in college" is way more interesting, but my kids may read this book one day, and I don't want to give them any of those ideas. My point is, being sneaky is just about one of the most fun feelings one can have. Isn't that interesting? We were made for adventure.

I absolutely love how my Hawaiian friend Monica Swanson, the author of *Boy Mom*, describes it. She believes in fiercely protecting her boys' hearts but giving them immense freedom to take physical risks.

While I am deeply concerned about protecting my boys' hearts, my husband and I believe strongly in encouraging them to experience healthy adventures and appropriate risks. When he was eleven years old, our son Luke started surfing giant waves at beaches known for potentially deadly conditions. (He had trained for it, I promise.) All our boys are avid spear fishermen who spend summer days diving deep in the ocean with powerful spearguns. . . . We give them freedoms to face reasonable risks.²

As a worrier (see previous page), I kind of gulp at the idea of my sons spearfishing in deep waters. It's ironic, though, because I have a gut feeling those deepwater adventures Monica's boys prep for are far less dangerous than letting kids hang out "safely" indoors with a bunch of technology.

How can we help our kids find thrill the right way? The possibilities are nearly endless and can vary depending on where you live and what kinds of resources you have around, but here are a few good old standbys:

- flashlight tag, capture the flag, laser tag, or paintball games
- scavenger hunts (My uncle once created elaborate, personalized hunts for each of us to find our Easter baskets on my

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grandparents' one-hundred-acre horse farm. We had the best time. I still remember some of the clues!)

- challenging physical activities, such as skiing, sledding, mountain biking, rafting, ropes courses, and skating
- any number of outrageous contraptions or concoctions your kids create that seem a little bit dangerous

Ah, yes. That last one: kids are actually experts at inventing their own ways to test their limits. Building bike ramps out of mounds of dirt, creating a roller coaster with pillows down the stairs, skateboarding down their mattresses, rappelling down the banister with belts tied together. I don't want to be labeled as sexist or anything, but in my personal experience boys in particular are oddly brilliant at devising these types of situations. My instinctive reaction to these things is usually some version of "Gah! That's not safe. Please stop right now!" But the truth is, we must allow them to take risks in a healthy way and fulfill their inborn longings for adventure so we're there to process it with them and help them learn.

One time after it snowed, the adventurous kids in the neighborhood constructed a giant snowboarding jump in someone's front yard. Which was fine, except that the conveniently located peak for the jump was actually a power transformer with large signs plastered all over that said, "Caution! Do not touch!" So we had a little talk about (1) reading posted warnings and (2) respecting electrical power—which are good reminders. Before you let them go be wild ones in the great big world, it's a fabulous idea to provide hard-and-fast boundaries for things that are always off-limits. A "family code of ethics for play," if you will. Here are some ideas:

- It is off-limits to inflict pain on people or animals.
- It is off-limits to damage or destroy property that does not belong to you.

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- It is off-limits to make someone do something that he or she does not want to do.
- It's off-limits to do something that an adult has already told you not to do.
- You have a good brain inside your head. Use it. If something seems like a bad idea, maybe it is.
- If you need help, I'm here for you.

Once your kids know the rules, you give them some space and let them play.

You know what's really awesome? Finding adventures that either

1. show kindness to someone else, or
2. require bravery to help someone.

You may have to help them think up some of these. Think along the lines of a *drive-by* blessing, where you leave a gift or gift card on the doorstep of someone who needs it, ring the doorbell, and sprint out of sight. It's like toilet-papering someone's house, but opposite. One twist on this is Saint Nicholas Day Candy Caning. Since Saint Nicholas was known for his generosity, on December 6 (Saint Nicholas Day) you find a family who could use some love. You drive to their house after dark, sneakily poking real candy canes into the ground or into flowerpots on their front porch. You leave a gift on the doorstep, ring the doorbell, and jet out of sight. My friend who shared this tradition commented that her boys felt so sneaky doing this activity, like stealthy Navy SEALs. It gave them such a rush. What a gift to give kids—the thrill of adventure *and* the thrill of helping someone. My kids still talk about the time we found a baby bird floundering in the pool and fished it out with pool noodles and skimming nets. We had to scoop it up into

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a plastic dive-toy box, and then we walked it home in the baby stroller to nurse it back to health. For three- and five-year-old boys, this amounted to an absolutely epic adventure to help save the little bird. (Between you and me, the bird disappeared from the garage while we were eating dinner, and I doubt he had learned to fly that quickly. I just had to get that off my chest.)

As your kids get older, independence is a sister to adventure. I think kids get antsy and moody when they're aching for more independence. My oldest was about eight years old when I noticed he was just not himself, bored and out of sorts. "Buddy, how would you like to ride your bike around the neighborhood . . . alone?" His eyes lit up like fireflies. He'd never been able to do that. I sent him out with a reminder of a few rules and worst-case-scenario solutions (I can't help myself), and off he went. His mood improved dramatically. Age-appropriate independence, with a hefty dose of "Wow, what a big kid you are now!" fulfills all sorts of needs inside of children. This is different from no supervision or just ignoring them to do whatever the heck they want. Rightful independence says, "I see you. I notice who you are, and what you're capable of. This is a new challenge, and you're up to it. I'll be right over here if you need me."

Not long ago the boys and their cousins discovered that if they climbed the fence behind my sister's yard, there was a whole long strip of uninhabited land full of overgrown bushes, streams and puddles, discarded treasures, snakes (this was never confirmed but imagined), rabid foxes (same), and bears (I mean . . . it could happen, right?). The boys christened this strip of land Manland, much to the severe disappointment of their outnumbered girl-cousin Katie, who begged for a more politically correct name, like Peopleland (but was overruled).

The kids loved Manland so much. They begged to go to Manland every day. They cried literal tears when they couldn't go.

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What was so great about it? One boy ended up with a case of poison ivy so bad he needed oral steroids. Several kids ripped their pants and were caked with mud and wet to the bone. It was literally just an overgrown piece of deserted property.

But they were alone. They were adventuring, unsupervised. Growing kids need their own versions of Manland. A place to pretend and risk and create. A Roxaboxen sort of place to build their own villages and colonies. And when one Manland feels dull and childish and ends up deserted, then they need room to forge a new road and find a new one. These are the adventures that make a childhood.