

## **“20 Years of Playtime: Our Children’s Leisure, Now and Then”**

A lot has changed since the first issue of Hudson Valley Parent rolled off the presses twenty years ago. Things we take for granted today, like twelve-hundred-dollar infant strollers and cribs outfitted with video surveillance cameras, would have seemed like something out of “The Jetsons” to the new moms and dads of 1994. Two decades ago, a child’s birthday party typically meant cake and present on the back deck; today’s parents increasingly opt for pay-per-kid events at local dance studios, bounce palaces or gymnastic schools.

Carol Lundergan of New Paltz has a unique perspective on these changes in family culture. A mom who raised young kids in the early 90s, she is now the full time legal guardian of an eight year old girl, a fact that gives her a special insight into the differences between then & now. The biggest changes, she feels, are in the arenas of connectivity and structure.

“Parents are just more involved with their kids nowadays,” she says. “20 years ago, I never spoke to my child’s teacher other than at teacher conferences; now I can email a teacher any time I want. I also know all the parents this time around, so there’s a lot more support and communication.” She sees this increased communication and involvement as a positive development, but also worries that it has led to too much rigidity in the lives of today’s kids. “Raising a child today,” she says, “I see that most kids are very heavily scheduled. Every second of their day is orchestrated, so they don’t develop the capacity to be with themselves and build their imagination.”

Over-reliance on structured time and constant wireless communication is something that concerns David Brownstein, co-founder and Executive Director of Wild Earth, a summer camp and wilderness program operating in the woods of Ulster County’s Shawangunk Ridge. The core Wild Earth program started eleven years ago with a small group of Hudson Valley parents seeking purer, minimally structured summer camp for their kids. “In the past,” explains Brownstein, “There was a lot more time to just explore on our own, as kids, to create our own fun. Today see the world as a lot more structured, and with a lot more distractions.”

Foremost among these distractions are cell phones and the Internet, which is why Wild Earth participants are required to hand over their devices before they go into the trees.

“We try to create an environment where kids can be outside exploring in the woods, fields and streams, and follow their natural curiosities and natural interests. It’s a very natural kind of learning called observation.” The idea is to unplug from the modern world and reconnect with world of nature, and Brownstein believes that the benefits are profound. “The biggest thing kids get from our programs is a stronger sense of who they are.”

But even within a philosophy that promotes unstructured exploration, there is the need to meet the needs and expectations of today’s families, and so Wild Earth has evolved and changed with the times, even as it attempts to offer a counterbalance to modernity. “We’re doing much more intentional programming now,” explains Brownstein. Indeed, Wild Earth’s website now includes information on dozens of programs for kids, families and even adults. Among these newer offerings include “True North,” a rite-of-passage program described as “Safe, contained risk-taking” for adolescents, which culminates in a 24-hour solo experience in the woods.

Another local institution that offers today’s over-scheduled families a chance to rediscover nature is the Hudson Highlands Nature Museum in Cornwall. The museum, which has an indoor center with educational displays, interactive exhibits, and live animals, has been around since 1959, but has recently expanded its focus to meet the needs of kids and families seeking more time in the open air. Marian Goldin, the museum’s Marketing Manager, says, “It’s gotten to the point where people don’t know how to explore the outdoors by themselves.” The solution that the museum offers is a natural experience blending the wildness of the woods with some of the structure and security that today’s parents demand. “Our new playground, Grasshopper Grove, is a large nature play area that’s gated. Younger kids can get out and play in nature, and the parents can be there with them, and they don’t feel insecure.”

In this same spirit, the museum also offers what Goldin calls “the bunny trails of hiking,” offering kids and parents a chance to walk, climb and explore without the more serious challenges of wilder areas frequented by seasoned trekkers. In addition, the museum operates popular summer camp programs, including one for 12 to 15-year olds. “It’s a week of camp,” says Goldin, “that ends with an overnight in the woods where they learn survival skills.”

Another prominent trend of today’s parents is the push to stimulate and educate children at younger ages, and one of the area’s most popular family-friendly destinations, the Mid-Hudson Children’s Museum, is working hard to meet this need head-on. Now located on the Hudson riverfront in Poughkeepsie, the museum was founded in 1989 with the goal of educating kids and families through interactive play. But after over two decades of catering to kids of all ages, the museum is now narrowing its focus. Says Sara Capozzoli, the museum’s Director of Public, Media and Corporate Relations: “The Museum has moved away from being a place for children of all ages to being a place for the youngest

members of our community, children ages 0-6. Providing young children with a place to develop early learning skills, helping parents lay a sturdy foundation of health and wellness education and fostering the idea of community and collaboration among our children is now what the Children's Museum aims to do." This change in philosophy can be seen as a direct response to the attitudes and expectations of today's parents. "Parents," Capozzoli explains, "Now more than ever, want their children to be ready for school and well equipped for today's world. The exhibits and programs at the museum are designed to be a resource for parents and caregivers to raise well adjusted, informed, kind, educated children."

Like Wild Earth and Hudson Highlands, The Mid-Hudson Children's Museum offers a very popular summer camp. "Our Summer Camp is something that we are particularly proud of," says Capozzoli. "The camps were completely redesigned in 2013 and have received incredibly good reviews. Designed as a 'first summer camp experience' for Children ages 3, 4 and 5, our half-day camps feature the fun of a traditional camp experience while encouraging the development of critical learning skills. Themed learning camps are packed with hands-on activities that offer age-appropriate introductions to nature, the human body, art, and science."

And while the museum and its programs are not specifically geared to helping families disconnect from tech, they now seem to embrace a back-to-basics approach that are compatible with the ideas behind the programs at Wild Earth and the Hudson Highlands Nature Museum. As Capozzoli put it: "Although technology has come a very long way in a short amount of time, allowing children to learn vital developmental skills is done without much technology at all."

### **Article Sidebar:**

#### **The Lingo:**

What we said in 1994, and what we say now

Then: Why don't you walk over to Claire's house for awhile?

Now: I'll call Claire's mom and set up a playdate for you.

Then: Go outside and ride your bike.

Now: Which should we sign up for this fall? The freestyle dance club, or the clay sculpture workshop?

Then: No television until your grades get better.

Now: Your grades are falling. I'll set up a meeting with your teacher, tutor, and principal.

Then: Max got his first tooth today!

Now: Max got the last slot in the good preschool today!

Then: Stop fighting or I'll turn this car around and drive straight home!

Now: Can mommy have her iPhone back for a second? I need to check the GPS.

Then: My daughter has a pen pal in Sweden! They write letters back and forth every month.

Now: My daughter made a YouTube video that went viral on Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook!