

# Into the Forest

In their new book, *The App Generation*, education professors Howard Gardner and Katie Davis argue that kids today are becoming more risk averse. “Rather than wanting to explore, to try things out by themselves, young people are always pushing to find out exactly what is wanted, when it is wanted, how it will be evaluated, what comes next and where we end up,” **they said in a recent Q-and-A.**

I was on a panel with Gardner in November, and he made a related observation: Many kids today have never gotten physically lost. They have never been outside, in an unfamiliar place, without a parent or a GPS or a phone app to guide them. They don’t know what it’s like to lose your way in the world around you and to make do until you find it again.

**Getting lost can be scary for kids (and for parents looking for children they can’t spot).** I don’t mean to romanticize it. And I’m not sure how much time my generation of parents spent wandering unfamiliar terrain either. But we should pause over Gardner and Davis’ underlying concern, about the implications of constantly channeling kids in a predetermined direction. This isn’t just about reliance on technology—it’s also a byproduct of the enormous anxiety parents feel about screwing up. The well-beaten path is easier to justify than the road to who knows where. The straighter and narrower, the better.

And yet, somewhere in our hearts, plenty of parents know that just can’t be right— not all the time, anyway. That’s why I’m so taken, I think, with a new 35-minute documentary about a forest kindergarten in Switzerland. Called *School’s Out: Lessons from a Forest Kindergarten*, the movie—which has been making the film festival rounds and is **available to buy here**—is a provocative jumping-off point for discussion precisely because the schooling it documents seems inconceivable to American parents and educators.

The forest kindergarten in *School's Out* is an outdoor school for 4- to 7-year-olds in Langnau am Albis, a town of about 7,000 in northern Switzerland. By school, I mean that the kids arrive every morning and spend the day there, rain, snow, or shine. I don't mean the other associations I have for the word *school*, like buildings and books.

It's autumn. A few kids splash through a muddy creek. One boy falls down in the water, gets up, squawks, keeps going.

The movie opens with a song that Gardner and Davis would surely like: "I lie in the moss/and simply watch and wonder." It's autumn. A few kids splash through a muddy creek. One boy falls down in the water, gets up, squawks, keeps going. A larger group sits and jumps in a makeshift-looking tent that consists of a tarp hung over a pole, with low walls made from stacked branches. A teacher tootles on a recorder. Later, the teacher describes the daily routine: Singing, story time, eating, and "then the children can play where they want in the forest." She continues, "During the play time, the children have a lot of space. They can go where they want. Usually I know where they are playing but I cannot see them always." The camera pans to a girl on a rope swing, swinging shockingly high into the tree canopy.

At this point, my 13-year-old son, who had wandered into the kitchen where I was watching the movie, started paying attention. "What about reading and math?" he asked. There isn't much direct instruction on either in forest kindergarten. In Switzerland (as in **Finland, the country American school reformers love to envy**), academics usually don't begin until age 7. The filmmakers, Lisa Molomot and Rona Richter (whom I know), tell us that Swiss kids soon catch up with their peers elsewhere. They contrast the freedom of forest kindergarten with the typical American school simply by running their camera down the daily schedule of activities at a public

kindergarten in New Haven, Conn. (where Richter and I live). Here's the list, which will be familiar to most parents: morning meeting, reader's workshop, writer's workshop, special (gym, music, art), lunch, recess, story time, choice, math centers, closing meeting. "It's a full day, with a lot of transitions," the New Haven teacher says.



The kids arrive every morning and spend the day—rain, snow, or shine—outside.

Courtesy Rona Richter

At least her students get recess. Connecticut passed a law in 2012 requiring it for 20 minutes in elementary schools. This was necessary because many kids, especially in low-income and urban schools, don't have it. **New Haven recently promised to actually implement the recess requirement by this January**, after parents complained that their kids still didn't have it. I hope this is part of a comeback for recess, spurred by a push to bring it back in Chicago, and to hang on to it in Los Angeles. As **Nicholas Day convincingly argued in *Slate*** last year, the case for recess is very strong:

Repeated studies have shown that when recess is delayed, children **pay less and less attention**. They are **more focused** on days when they have recess. A major study in *Pediatrics* found that children with more than 15 minutes of recess a day were **far better behaved in class** than children who had shorter recess breaks or none at all.

This is so intuitive to me, given my own kids' need to move their bodies every other minute, that begging for more outside time is my main refrain at my 10-year-old's school. I'm mystified by the Atlanta superintendent who said, in scrapping recess, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars." Actually, yes you do.

Forest kindergarten is not the only answer, of course, though it is catnip if you are drawn to the view that kids should have more leeway to figure out play on their own. Still, there is an interesting debate to be had between unstructured playtime, and the more organized approach of groups like **Playworks**, which puts recess coaches into low-income schools, based on the theory that many kids need to be nudged and tempted into the kinds of games they used to learn from older kids in the neighborhood. Also, I stopped wanting to spend the day in the Swiss woods when autumn turned into snowy winter. The kids had to march around in their makeshift tent to keep warm, their breath puffing in the cold air. It's a little pathetic of me, I know, but I felt for the child who tucked himself into a shivering ball in the corner and cried. It all looked awfully hard-core, though I suppose I should mention the parents who claimed their children didn't get sick once.

The image in *School's Out* that seemed more attainable—if still elusive—was a smaller one than the soaring swing or the freezing snow. It was a scene with a girl named Holly, shown playing on her own at home with a bunch of sticks and pinecones. Her mother says that she used to be into princess stuff; now, though, she doesn't need a lot of toys. Back in Connecticut, the New Haven teacher also talks about the importance of introducing her students to materials that don't have to be used in a certain way. Gardner and Davis point out that some apps and games are built to push kids in this direction—they're "enabling" rather than dependence-building. I'm all for that, but it's hard to imagine a more natural way to instill this capacity in kids than sending them

outside every day. If we can't have forest kindergarten in the United States, can we at least try universal summer camp?