

# A summer to remember

by Tracy Morris, contributing writer

Remember how long summer seemed to last when you were a kid? Blue sky, thick with cicada calls. Whether you were running around taking the biggest bite of unleashed freedom that your parents allowed, or just hanging out in the deepest shade you could find, there was no reason to stay inside—even the Texas sun couldn't keep you in the house!

Not so today. One mother, frustrated with her children's repetitive whining about the heat during a day at the park exclaimed, "They're just like air-conditioned wimps!"

Clamoring for cool comfort aside, so many things are different for today's Houston children. More prevalent crime and mesmerizing indoor activities combine to create a perplexing situation. We have our own idyllic childhood summers lolling around in our memories. We want our families to have fond remembrances of their own. Is it possible to recreate those summers of old?

Elaine Mut of West University offers a perspective common among parents who grew up in the '60s "when you could go down the street and not show back up 'til dinner or bedtime!" Besides feeling generally less secure now than she did in her youth—Elaine is with her 5-year-old twins if they're beyond the backyard—gatherings back then seemed to be more spontaneous. She recalls neighborhood based parties that included guests of all ages, not just same aged kids from school, and simple games.

Parents recall unscheduled freedom and little fear. "Life was less tense. We seemed to have more time to be idle," Cheryl Przygocki reminisces. The Bellaire resident's Louisiana childhood was similar in ways to Houston's past. Her semi-rural community of new homes was bordered by cattle pastures, not unlike how much of Houston developed.

Dee Dee Vickers' summers were filled with extended family as well as trips to the cool Colorado mountains. With her sisters and cousins, time idled by as they "crawled on huge boulders, fed chipmunks, waded in ice cold streams, and went on cook outs." Dee Dee remarks, "I was only 6 years old when I slid down a glacier on a raincoat!"

Parents back then usually had a good idea of where their energetic unfettered kids were "even though we might leave the house after breakfast and not check in again until lunch," Cheryl sighs. "We built tree houses, ran in the fields, rode our bikes to the corner store for candy, played baseball with whatever kids showed up at the nearby school..."

Today's parents are concerned that their children are missing out on summer as they remember it.

In over 25 years of counseling practice, Teddie Melhart

Wright, LCSW, LMFT has witnessed the shifting struggle for families. Among other concerns, today's work schedules render the recreation of some memories impossible. Wright says rather than trying to create idyllic summers for their children, parents will be more successful if they focus on making meaningful memories.

"Perhaps ideally, parents can come up with memorable activities by balancing time for relationships with family and friends, making room for inspiration with some travel or even volunteer service, creating traditions through reunions and even with special foods," Wright elaborates. She emphasizes that simple ideas are effective, like local day trips that are tougher to squeeze into the school year. Just making a point to enjoy uniquely summer treats like barbeque, watermelon, and

homemade ice cream can boost the season's reminiscent value.

"I think that the more we can unplug our kids from TVs, MP3 players, Game Boys...the more possibilities for relationships, inspiration, traditions, and education. Hence, a more memorable and meaningful summer," offers Wright.

Parents are finding a happy medium between today's realities and their wishes for their children.

Elaine Mut and her husband, Alan, combine exercise, being outdoors, and socializing by jogging as their daughters, Nicole and Michelle, tag along on training

wheels. More than just being family time, it's a way for them to recreate that old neighborhood feeling.

"I hope by going to the park, running into the same kids and parents, we're staying looser than the 'playdate' concept, which can get stressful when trying to schedule everyone's time," Elaine remarks.

Cheryl Przygocki's adolescent daughter is allowed to venture out on her skateboard or bike during daylight hours, but always with a cell phone in her pocket, just in case.

"I try to strike a balance between teaching my daughter to be safe, yet not freaking her out unnecessarily," says Cheryl. "I want her to enjoy life. It's not an easy balance to achieve."

Some parents, like Cheryl, find that packing their kids up to camp in more rural destinations is a good way to find that balance, opening windows to how things used to be—and still are in some places.

Don't discount the impact of your own summertime stories! School-aged children especially crave the connection that comes from hearing about "back in the day." Tell them they'll have their own memories to share as grown-ups, and they'll naturally think of the best things in life.



Dee Dee Vickers has fond memories of summers spent as a girl in Estes Park, Colorado. Pictured left to right are Dee Dee and her sisters Janet and Joan.