

# THE MONTHLY

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## Feature

*Camp Wishi* / *By Sarah Lavender Smith*

This summer will be different. This summer, my 9-year-old daughter will not look sweaty and stoic as she eats lunch in a van operated by the rec department, which carpools her and a few other kids who aren't her friends from soccer to scrapbooking. My 6-year-old son will not be forced to finish the week of Ancient Egypt and Amusement Park Engineering, which he declared on Day 2 was "boring" and "weird" and said he wished I would take him to the pool.

I will not wake on a Monday—the birdsong and 80-degree blue sky mocking me, my first word an expletive—and struggle to unscramble mental notes: Is this the week I take my daughter to theater camp, or to ice skating? And where am I supposed to deposit my son for outdoor exploring? Surely there would be a first-day parents' orientation at either or both places. Surely I'd get to work on the other side of the Sunol Grade at least an hour late.

"Honey." I poked my husband to wake him.

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He heard the seriousness of my tone. "What's wrong?"

"One of us will probably have to take Friday afternoon off to watch the kids do a show at a camp, and I can't remember if this is the week that Kyle is supposed to be a Sprout or a Huckleberry."

For the past few years, from September through May, our family deftly managed a schedule involving two jobs, two schools, one part-time nanny and assorted afternoon commitments. Then, on or around the summer solstice, our finely choreographed routine invariably lost its balance as the tempo of our lives sped up, while the steps changed from week to week. The kids were hustled off to programs—an hour here, three hours there, nanny care in between, endless e-mails to coordinate pickups and dropoffs—so they could be cared for (or, at least, watched) while we were at work.

Inevitably, out-of-town houseguests showed up midweek, smiles on their faces and Fisherman's Wharf on their agenda.

T-ball took over, the nanny took off.

I began to hate summer.

My parents never enrolled me in an "outdoor explorer" camp during summer, nor did they enlist a corps of child-care providers

My parents never enrolled me in an “outdoor explorer” camp during summer, nor did they enlist a corps of child-care providers to supervise my unstructured time. When I was my daughter’s age, they needed only to open the sliding glass door that framed a corner of the Colorado Rockies and shoo my sister and me outside. Off we went for hours, leather bridles dangling over our shoulders as we hiked the backcountry in search of the neighbor’s horses, which we tried to catch and ride bareback.

Summer meant sneaking out the window of our log cabin at night with a friend—a canteen of grape juice and a canister of Pringles smuggled along with our sleeping bags—so we could camp under the high-altitude starlight and sneak back at dawn before anyone knew we were missing. Summer meant grossing out at fish guts by the river while we cleaned our catch, and then eating fried trout for breakfast with lots of ketchup and the heads still on.

I want to fall in love with summer again and let my children experience at least a fraction of the freedom and adventure I had when I was a kid let loose from school. If my kids ask me (as they did the other day) if they can drag a giant metal tub out of the garage, fill it with water, and use Tupperware and foil to make boats, I want to say, “Sure, go for it,” instead of hearing myself repeat that we don’t have time because we have to go somewhere and could they please stop taking stuff out of the kitchen drawers.

It’s easy to blame our careers as the obstacle standing in the way of an idyllic summer. After all, my dad had an academic job with summers off—three whole months free—and my mom didn’t work much outside the home.

But I can’t point my finger at a boss or a commute anymore because I quit my job last fall in order to slow the pace and reconnect with the kids. I now have the time to unwind and could make more if I wanted. If pushed, my husband could downscale his responsibilities and make more time, too.

And yet here we are looking at a calendar as full of camps as it was last summer. Granted, I’ll be the one doing the drop-offs and pickups, and the kids won’t have to finish a program they don’t like, but it looks like I’m still depriving them of what they crave most: time to “hang out,” to do nothing.

I allegedly signed them up for all these programs because I don’t want them to miss out on opportunities that sound fun and educational. But honestly, they’re not the ones who need science and trapeze and kids’ carpentry and all-day Camp Ishi (whatever that is). It’s me. The fact is that I have a hard time relaxing enough to engage and enjoy my kids all day for several days in a row. It’s not impossible, but it’s not something I’m good at. I sincerely doubt we could handle long stretches of free time; they wouldn’t know what to do with themselves, and neither would I.

Re-creating the summers of my youth would take me too far out of this uncomfortable comfort zone in which busy-ness is a barometer of self-worth and idleness stirs insecurity. It’s gotten to the point where lying on a beach towel doesn’t feel right unless I read a certain number of pages or return calls on my cell. I fear—yet

haven't mastered the willingness to prevent—the unintended consequence of my way of life and of all these summer camps: that my kids are losing every child's natural gift of using their imaginations to create fun out of thin air. Like me, they may no longer feel free with free time.

This summer will be different: I will work harder to relax.

Hey, can anyone recommend a summer camp for families where we actually camp and do summer? Oh, you say we had to sign up last winter and there's a waiting list? I'll make a note to look into it for 2008. I'd like to fit "summer" back into our calendar.

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Sarah Lavender Smith is a freelance writer living in Piedmont. Her most recent job involved editing psychology and self-help books—books whose advice she's still striving to follow.

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