

# Social Skills and the Flickering Screen

By Elsje de Boer

It is nearing twelve noon, a bright, cool spring day. Their morning assignments completed, the ten students aged eight to twelve who do their lessons around my extra-large kitchen table explode out of the house for their lunch break. All of them have learning problems, several of them have behavior problems, and none of them fit in with the other kids in school. Here, they roam around on the twenty or thirty acres of wild forest, bush land and rock bluffs. For several days, they amuse themselves by throwing rocks down a precipice. When the youngest, a difficult eight year old, hits his shin on a rock and claims he can't walk, the biggest of the boys hoists him onto his back and carries him back to the house. As it turns out it is nothing serious: a bad scrape and a bit of a bruise, nothing a band-aid and a bit of TLC won't cure.

At first hesitant and cautious, then with increasing bravura, they walk the sky-walk, a wide log rigged ten feet above the ground. They are well aware of the price of a moment's inattention and one hand hovers on or lingers just above the guide rope strung waist high above the log. Then, they invent games: the one who is "it" is on the ground with a ball and tries to hit those on the sky walk, who then will be "it." The three girls prefer sitting in the sun watching the activity from a distance.

During the winter, they built elaborate igloos in the deep snow, cutting the blocks to size, stacking them, chinking the cracks with snow, and adding a low, curved entrance tunnel. Then they took off the roofs and organized elaborate snow fights between the teams in each igloo. Now that the snow is gone, they are up in the forest building forts with branches, left-over lumber, binder twine, and moss. They decide they belong to two different tribes, and that there will be competition between the tribes, but not warfare. They need a system of justice and construct a court house, an excuse to build another fort.

In fact, justice is swift and fair. When the little nine year old fireball in yet another fit of temper attacks, it is the oldest boy who tackles him, expertly brings him down, and sits on him until he calms down. Rarely do I have to intervene. Most of the time, I am in the house, one ear and one eye on the children outside, straightening up, checking and correcting the morning's work, setting up for the group lesson in social studies scheduled for the early afternoon.

They don't swear. And that's a bit of surprise since it is not explicitly forbidden here and many, perhaps most of them, hear little else at home. But when they do, instead of embarrassing me, I embarrass them, and that takes all the fun out of it. We watch my drake breeding the duck who happens to be his mother. "And what does that make that drake?" I ask them. They know the word well, but they look at me in dumb incomprehension. It takes three days. Then they walk in with big grins on their faces: "NOW I know what you meant! About that duck, you know?"

This is how they learn social skills: by interacting with each other in a free, unstructured environment, by inventing their own games and making up their own rules, by dealing

with each other's strengths and weaknesses. They are a team, and they look out for each other, even for the ones who are annoying or unreasonable or aggressive. They learn from each other.

That is an opportunity so many children today do not have. Many are enrolled in organized sports as early as four or five years old. They do not play on the street or in the back yard, let alone on an empty lot with some big cardboard boxes and left-over lumber, trees to climb and an old tire or two. Instead, they watch television, go on-line, play electronic games. There is little or no interaction with real, live people, and they don't get to make up their own rules, develop their own idea of fair play, deal with another's injury or aggressiveness. Under those circumstances it is difficult to develop good social skills.

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