

# I'm Done Making My Kid's Childhood Magical

by Bunmi Laditan

If our grandmothers and great-grandmothers could see the pressure modern mothers put on themselves, they'd think we were insane.

Since when does being a good mom mean you spend your days creating elaborate crafts for your children, making sure their rooms are decked-out Pottery Barn Ikea masterpieces worthy of children's magazines, and dressing them to the nines in trendy coordinated outfits?

I don't believe for a moment that mothers today love their kids any more than our great-grandmothers loved theirs. We just feel compelled to prove it through ridiculously expensive themed birthday parties that have do-it-yourself cupcake stations with 18 types of toppings and over-the-top gifts.

For a few years, I got caught up in the "Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better" parenting model, which mandates you scour Pinterest for the best ideas, execute them flawlessly, and then share the photo evidence with strangers and friends via blogs and Facebook posts.

Suddenly, it came to me: We do not need to make our children's childhood magical. Childhood is inherently magical, even when it isn't perfect. My childhood wasn't perfect and we weren't rich by any stretch of the imagination, but my birthdays were still happy because my friends came over. It wasn't about the party bags, perfect decorations, or any of that. We popped balloons, ran around in the backyard, and we had cake. Simple. But when I look back on those times, they were magical.

Christmas. With four of us kids and a limited income, my parents bought maybe two gifts per kid. There was no Elf on the Shelf all month long monitoring our activities and getting into photo-worthy trouble. No special Christmas jammies. Very few decorations, if any. We didn't even make cookies. What made that time of year simply ethereal for me as a child was huddling in one bed with my brothers thinking we could hear Santa's reindeer on the roof. It was so much fun to try to stay awake, giggle together, and just anticipate the next morning. It was magical. I did not feel as if I lacked for anything.

I don't have a single memory of doing a craft with my parents. Crafts were something I did in preschool and primary school. The only "crafts" I recall were the ones my mother created in her spare time. The hum of her sewing machine would often lull me to sleep as she turned scrap cloth into hair accessories to sell and hemmed our clothes.

At home we played. All the time. After school, we'd walk home from the bus stop, drop off our backpacks and my mom would push us out of the house. We ran around with the

neighborhood kids until dinner. Times are different now and very few of us feel comfortable letting our kids wander, but even when we were inside, we played with our toys and video games. We made blanket forts. We watched TV. We slid down the stairs on pillows. Our parents were not responsible for entertaining us. If we dared to mutter those two words, "I'm bored," we would be handed a chore.

I look back on those times and smile. I can still recall what it felt like to have carefree fun.

My parents made sure we were warm and fed, and planned the occasional special activity for us (Friday night pizza was a tradition in my home), but when it came to the day-to-day, we were on our own to be kids. They rarely played with us. Apart from the random empty refrigerator box scrounged from the back of an electronics store, we weren't given toys outside of our birthdays and major holidays. Our parents were around in case we needed something or there was accident, but they were not our main source of entertainment.

Today, parents are being fed the idea that it benefits children to constantly be hand in hand, face to face, "What do you need my precious darling? How can I make your childhood amazing?" You can't walk through Pinterest without tripping over 100 Indoor Summer Craft Ideas, 200 Inside Activities for Winter, 600 Things To Do With Your Kids In The Summer. 14 Million Pose Ideas For Elf on The Shelf. 12 Billion Tooth Fairy Strategies. 400 Trillion Birthday Themes.

Parents do not make childhood magical. Abuse and gross neglect can mar it, of course, but for the average child, the magic is something inherent to the age. Seeing the world through innocent eyes is magical. Experiencing winter and playing in the snow as a 5-year-old is magical. Getting lost in your toys on the floor of your family room is magical. Collecting rocks and keeping them in your pockets is magical. Walking with a branch is magical.

It is not our responsibility to manufacture contrived memories on a daily basis.

None of this negates the importance of time spent as a family, but there is a huge difference between focusing on being together and focusing on the construction of an "activity." One feels forced and is based on a pre-determined goal, while the other is more natural and relaxed. The immense pressure that parents put on themselves to create ethereal experiences is tangible.

I've been told we went to Disneyland when I was 5. I have no memory of this, but I've seen the faded photographs. What I do remember from that age is the pirate Halloween costume I wore proudly, picking plums from the tree in front of my house, intentionally flooding the backyard garden to teach myself to skip rocks, and playing with my dog on my front stoop.

I have not one memory of the vacation that my parents probably saved for months for: the vacation that was most likely quite stressful. The "most magical place on Earth" in my childhood was not a theme park; it was my home, my bedroom, my backyard, my friends, my family, my books and my mind.

When we make life a grand production, our children become audience members and their appetite for entertainment grows. Are we creating a generation of people who cannot find the beauty in the mundane?

Do we want to teach our children that the magic of life is something that comes beautifully gift-wrapped -- or that magic is something you discover on your own?

Planning elaborate events, daily crafts, and expensive vacations isn't harmful for children. But if the desire to do so comes from a place of pressure or even a belief that the aforementioned are a necessary part of one's youth, it's time to reevaluate.

A childhood without Pinterest crafts can be magical. A childhood without a single vacation can be magical. The magic we speak of and so desperately want our children to taste isn't of our creation, and therefore is not ours to dole out as we please. It is discovered in quiet moments by a brook or under the slide at the park, and in the innocent laughter of a life just beginning.

We constantly hear that children these days don't get enough exercise. Perhaps the most underused of all of their muscles is the imagination, as we seek desperately to find a recipe for something that already exists.