

SAY CONNECTS

A YEAR-LONG SERIES FOCUSING ON COMMUNICATING OUR PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN

**BLOCK PARTY
RESOURCES
INSIDE**

INTRODUCTION

Neighbors knowing neighbors

The partners that form SAY have embraced the goal that all of our kids feel a sense of belonging in our community; and that belonging starts right on your block. Research has shown that neighborhood social cohesion has positive effects on well-being.

Young people benefit from our institutions and resources in many ways, but what they most take with them as they move through life is the way those experiences made them feel. Did they feel safe, cared for or listened to? These gifts from non-familial adults bolster their sense of confidence and empowerment as they move through the world.

Oak Park and River Forest will be known as communities in which ALL kids receive that gift. We encourage you to be part of the movement that takes us from merely knowing each other to caring for and supporting each other. Let's make this so pervasive that it's palpable.



Linda Francis
Director
Success of All Youth

Our website is SAYoprf.org.
And we're on Facebook at
Success of All Youth.



WATCHFUL EYE: Christina Waters balances independence and watchfulness with her kids Christian and Elaina in a visit to Scoville Park
(PHOTO BY CASSANDRA WEST)

Raising free-range kids

Bubble-wrapping your children does them no favors

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

At some point, a parent must decide when it's time to allow a child more freedom. The freedom to walk to school alone. The freedom to take the el into the city. The freedom to make plans with friends and execute those plans.

To let go and let them become "free-range kids."

"We've tried to do steps, leveling up the independence with the kids," says Ana Garcia Doyle, mother of three children between 9 and 17. "But I do attribute living in Oak Park to the success of being able to let out the rein," says Garcia Doyle, who grew up in downtown Chicago, first taking the CTA herself when she was 9.

Giving a child free range can be daunting for the parent and the child. Often it's parents who are the most fearful about their child exploring the world around them. A recent Wall Street Journal essay noted that "children have less independence and autonomy today than they did a few generations ago," pointing to stats indicating that fewer children ride their bikes around their own neighborhoods

or walk to school on their own. It's understandable that there's a "climate of fear among parents," says Gerald Lordan, a long-time Oak Parker and teacher at Fenwick High School. His research interests include nurturing critical, independent thinkers. But there's always been terrible things happening in the world, he says. There

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Making our communities a better place - one child at a time!

How did block parties get started?

Goes back to the '70s and efforts to connect neighbors

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

It's June. It's a Saturday. You're bound to come across a block party somewhere in Oak Park.

Block parties are a staple of summer in the village. Kids on bikes. A bounce house in the street. Grownups managing the grill. Neighbors getting to know one another.

Block parties began in the mid-1970s in Oak Park and they are still going strong. Their beginning has little to do with bounce houses and grilling hot dogs, though.

"One of the things that we were trying to do was to get people together," recalls Sherlynn Reid, who was director of the village government's Community Relations Department for many years. "And we thought that having block parties would be one way to get people on blocks [together] because we were trying to encourage racial diversity throughout the community. Having organized block parties would help people get to know each other and also ensure diversity and inclusion of people of different races and backgrounds."

And that's how block parties got started, Reid says.

In those early days, the community relations staff would assist residents in setting a date for their party and contact the police. "Because a policeman would come out and talk to residents," Reid says.

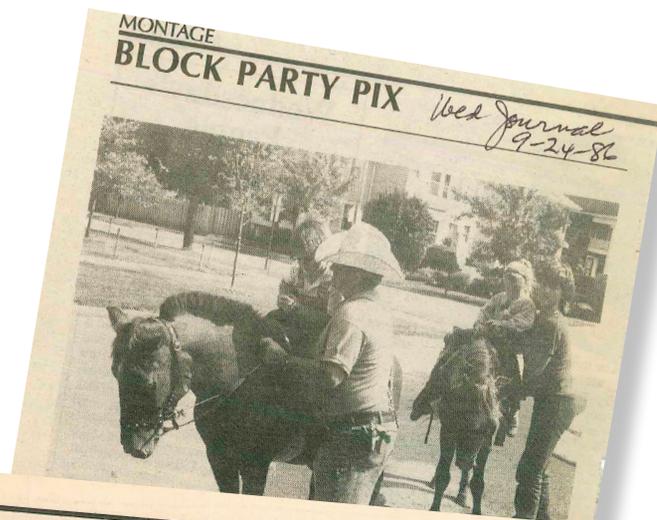
Oak Parkers took to the idea. "They went right for them," Reid says. "That's why we had so many. It took some people, especially in the blocks where they are more racially diverse, a while to decide whether [parties] were something they wanted to do."

Now there's probably not a block that hasn't had a party over the years. And the village still engages them "as a way to build community spirit, meet neighbors and have fun," its website says. "From time to time the number of block parties may have to be limited due to demand."

And that says they're still popular, much to Reid's delight.



Everyone on the 1100 block of Wesley Av. gathered in September 1958 for a first block party.



BLOCK PARTY PIX 600 Lyman
Journal's Block Party Pix are back!

Journal photo by A. Lisee



Games, Roman style



Let's party
Oak Park neighbors celebrate the sweet, waning days of summer

1100 S. Clarence



WAY BACK MACHINE: Both the Journal and Oak Leaves regularly published block party pictures through the 1980's. (Photos Courtesy of The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest)



NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK:

During a block party on Linden Avenue in Oak Park on June 16, kids play (top) inside of a bounce house in the middle of the street, while children (right) play in a kids pool in a front yard. Julian Alhanoun (below left), 2, of Oak Park, plays in the street. Cooper Jones (below right), 10, of Oak Park, eats a grilled foot-long hotdog.



Photos by ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bringing renters into the block party fun

Last summer a team of interns working on a program called Neighbors Knowing Neighbors helped put on about a half dozen block parties around the village. What made their parties different is they were held in the courtyards of multi-family buildings.

Having earlier canvassed areas with mostly multi-family dwellings, the interns heard “that block parties are great but only involve single family homes and the renters aren’t as engaged,” says Michele Rodriguez Taylor, interim director of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center.

So the center worked with the interns, recruited by Success of All Youth, to develop a campaign and strategy to get block parties specifically targeting renters on the block. The parties, planned and organized by the teen interns who teamed up with local landlord Esco Properties, aimed to make sure children in buildings felt welcome by having a lot of activities for them. Some activities included a dance-a-thon and frozen T-shirt contest (some chills and thrills on a hot summer day).

Oak Park Apartments, another local apartment management company, puts on movie nights for its tenant families. The company will rent the Lake Theater and screen a movie that appeals to kids, a blockbuster superhero or cartoon. They get to go downtown and “feel they’re part of a bigger community,” says Jim Rolff, vice president of operations for Oak Park Apartments.

It’s often not as easy for children who live in apartment buildings, many along busy streets, to feel part of a neighborhood. Rodriguez says a part of the center’s mission is trying to help build community and to get “people interacting.”

Block parties can help to some degree to break down barriers between single family and multi-family residents.

The more youth who can get out, interacting “that’s going to impact their outlook, too, as far as how they feel growing up in Oak Park. It would be a shame to say, ‘I grew up in Oak Park. [It was] known for diversity, but I never felt welcome because my parents rented.’ So what are we doing to make everyone feel welcome?”

— Cassandra West

Block party resources

Block Parties in OP: www.oak-park.us/our-community/block-parties-garage-sales, 708.358.5700 or e-mail blockparty@oak-park.us.

Green Block Parties: www.oak-park.us/village-services/refuse-recycling/keep-oak-park-beautiful/green-block-party-request-form

OPPL Book Bike: oppl.org/visit/the-oak-park-book-bike/book-bike-make-a-request/

Dinner & Dialogue: www.oak-park.us/our-community/community-relations/dinner-dialogue

Block Parties in RF: https://vrf.us/forms/form/1?utm_source=%2fresidents%2fblock-party-permits&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=redirect

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Two parents, two 'Let Grow' stories

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

Reasons to keep a watchful eye

After a late lunch of tacos Saturday on Lake Street, Christina Waters and her two younger children, Elaina and Christian, biked over to Scoville Park. Waters sat on a bench and watched them go around and around the park.

After she'd had enough of circling, Elaina, 8, wanted to go to the playground. But Waters wouldn't be able to see her from where she was sitting. Elaina tried to convince her mom that she would be OK. The playground was only 20 or 30 yards away.

"I know Scoville Park can be a tough place to be sometimes," Waters says, after the three moved closer to the playground area. By that she means the park is often a hangout for various populations of adults that made



Christina Waters and her two children, Elaina and Christian at Scoville Park. (PHOTO BY CASSANDRA WEST)

her uneasy. She perceives "It's always been one of the spots that the park district, library and village have found challenging, which is why, I particularly want her within my eyesight."

Waters says she would be more comfortable giving her daughter more range at Longfellow Park, which is in the neighborhood where she herself grew up. "My mom lives within a few

blocks and we have neighbors that we know. She could go to the park with her brothers on their own."

Waters is even more protective of her sons. "Particularly for my boys, 15 and 11," she says. "They're black males. I don't ever want them to be in a position where," she says, letting out a heavy sigh, "their integrity or character is misjudged so drastically that they're in a position that they can't get themselves out of."

She has talked with them about her apprehensions. "It wouldn't do them any good if they weren't aware of why I felt that sense of protection and how it differs, so I had to talk to them."

Ranging afar: A road trip with friends

Fresh from graduating from high school, Mia Lucci, who recently turned 18, announced to her mom

that she wanted to take a road trip to Canada with some friends. "First I need to get my mom's approval," she says, hopefully.

Her mother, Susan, hasn't yet blessed the idea. That would be a big step for the River Forest teen, even one who spent four years attending high school in the city, taking the CTA, then driving herself on the Eisenhower.

Susan Lucci's approach to giving her three children (Mia is the youngest) more freedom has been to balance it for each of them, "really playing with that stretch," she says.

"What I do for each of these transitions is really feel them out for it. I don't want them to break and fail miserably, but I don't want them to be afraid of the world."

Mia's still hoping that trip to Canada will happen.

FREE-RANGE continued from page 1

have "always been earthquakes and famines and floods. We just didn't know about it" [the way people do today.] We tend to think of the world as going crazy. It's always been crazy."

Lordan says he understands the anxiety parents have. A lot of comes from "adults who live in Balkanized networks," he says. People don't know others outside of their cohorts—and families have gotten smaller. When the number of children decreases, "the amount of focus and attention that one child gets goes up. Too much of a good thing can be bad for us."

One reason there are fewer free-range children, he thinks, is that parents with fewer children can spend more time monitoring children's behavior. And that leads to the "hurried child," who gets rushed one from activity to the next. "Kids don't have enough time to play and assimilate stimuli on their own."

Educators and psychologists warn of overzealous parenting, seeing it as "one factor fueling a surge in the number of children and young adults being diagnosed with anxiety disorders," the Wall Street Journal piece noted.

Children all mature differently, says Orson Morrison, an Oak Park psychologist who works with children and families and directs DePaul Family and Community Services in Chicago. "It's important for parents to know their child, to know where they are developmentally," Morrison says. "One 9-year-old may be super responsible and super mature and able to navigate the community, whereas another may need a lot of supervision and oversight."



Orson Morrison

Morrison believes the sensible approach to loosening the apron strings, or shirt tails, is to take it gradually. He encourages parents to introduce new freedoms one at a time. Consider allowing a child to ride their bike around town, he says. Get a sense of where your child is in terms of his or her ability to navigate independently, how savvy they are in terms of safety issues.

"I feel like in Oak Park, a kid can get around starting in 4th, 5th grade on their bikes," Garcia Doyle says. "If they can do a little check in." With most kids these days having their own mobile phones, that's easy, she adds.

Morrison thinks the term "free-range kids" grew out of the backlash to helicopter parenting, so "experts wanted to go the opposite way."

About 10 years ago, former jour-

nalist Lenore Skenazy launched the "Free-Range Kids" blog after getting lots of criticism over a column she wrote about letting her then 9-year-old son navigate New York City by himself. With the blog, she says she's "fighting the belief that our children are in constant danger from creeps, kidnapping, germs, grades, flashers, frustration, failure, baby snatchers, bugs, bullies, men, sleepovers and/or the perils of a non-organic grape." Through her nonprofit Let Grow, Skenazy tries to convince entire communities to give their kids independence. The idea has caught on. Last fall, Michael J. Hynes, superintendent of a school district on Long Island in New York, launched a Let Grow project because he was seeing kids "bubble wrapped" and averse to risk-taking, something Lordan, the Fenwick teacher, has witnessed, too.

Parents step in to rescue kids from their mistakes, Lordan says. "We're so proactive in the way we manage their lives, they never do anything wrong. If they do something wrong, then we step in to solve the problem."

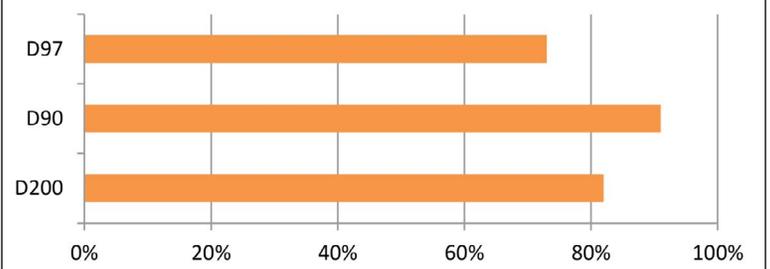
Being more of a free-range parent helps with a child's development, says Morrison.

Some think "free-range parents sometimes implies a very laissez-faire approach," Morrison says. "But I do think parents need to balance allowing for gradual autonomy and freedom while still providing some structure and planning around safety

I belong in my neighborhood

THE CHALLENGE: Increase the number of children who report they feel connected to one or more adults in their neighborhood.

"Adults in the Neighborhood" by District



2016 Youth "agree" or "strongly agree" responses to "Adults in this neighborhood know who the local children are," "People in this neighborhood can be trusted," and "There are adults in this neighborhood that children can look up to." (Data Source: 5 Essentials)

concerns, so if [a child] encounters certain things in the community, what do they do, where can they go, whom can they call."

He's aware, though, that some kids more than others -- African American children -- "face different sorts of safety issues" out in the world. "Parents of color often report concerns for safety of their tweens/teens as they navigate the community on their own and they struggle to find safe spaces in the community for their tweens to hang out," Morrison says.

It's important for parents to engage their children in exercising their own critical thinking and executive functioning skills, Morrison says. One day

that daughter or son will be out of the house and need to know to manage on his or her own. Perhaps the first time your child is having to make an appointment or to plan something, you take a more active role. But the next time, you allow them to take the reins and eventually you're allowing them to do it on their own."

That's essential, says Garcia Doyle. "It's a total disservice for them to not be trained under your tutelage."

"For them to be 19, go off to college and never have taken public transportation. They have a part time job, an internship and they looked stunned and lost. That is not how you get a street smart kid."