



# Doing Nothing Is Something

by Anna Quindlen

**ANALYZE VISUALS**  
What **mood** does this  
photograph suggest  
to you?

## Summer is coming soon.

I can feel it in the softening of the air, but I can see it, too, in the textbooks on my children's desks. The number of uncut pages at the back grows smaller and smaller. The looseleaf is ragged at the edges, the binder plastic ripped at the corners. An old remembered glee rises inside me.

10 Summer is coming. Uniform skirts in mothballs. Pencils with their points left broken. Open windows. Day trips to the beach. Pickup games. Hanging out.

How boring it was.

Of course, it was the making of me, as a human being and a writer. Downtime is where we become ourselves, looking into the middle  
20 distance, kicking at the curb, lying on the grass or sitting on the stoop and staring at the tedious blue of the summer sky. I don't believe you can write poetry, or compose music, or become an actor without downtime, and plenty of it, a **hiatus** that passes for boredom but is really the quiet moving of the wheels inside that fuel creativity.

30 And that, to me, is one of the saddest things about the lives of American children today. Soccer leagues, acting classes, tutors—the calendar of the average middle-class kid is so over the top that soon Palm handhelds will be sold in Toys “R” Us. Our children are as overscheduled as we are, and that is saying something. **A**

40 This has become so bad that parents have arranged to schedule times for unscheduled time. Earlier this year the privileged suburb of Ridgewood, N.J., announced a Family Night, when there would be no homework, no athletic practices and no after-school events. This was terribly exciting until I realized that this was not one night a week,  
50 but one single night. There is even a free-time movement, and Web site: familylife1st.org. Among the frequently asked questions provided online: “What would families do with family time if they took it back?”

Let me make a suggestion for the kids involved: how about nothing? It is not simply that it is pathetic to consider the lives of children who  
60 don't have a moment between piano and dance and homework to talk about their day or just search for split ends, an enormously satisfying leisure-time activity of my youth. There is also ample psychological research suggesting that what we might call “doing nothing” is when human beings actually do their best thinking, and when creativity comes  
70 to call. Perhaps we are creating an entire generation of people whose ability to think outside the box, as the current parlance<sup>1</sup> of business has it, is being systematically stunted by scheduling.

A study by the University of Michigan quantified<sup>2</sup> the downtime **deficit** in the last 20 years American kids have lost about four unstruc-  
80 tured hours a week. There has even arisen a global Right to Play movement: in the Third World it is often about child labor, but in the United States it is about the sheer labor of being a perpetually busy child. In Omaha, Neb., a group of parents recently lobbied for additional recess. Hooray, and yikes. **B**

How did this happen? Adults did  
90 it. There is a culture of adult distrust that suggests that a kid who is not playing softball or attending science-enrichment programs—or both—is huffing or boosting cars: if kids are left alone, they will not stare into the middle distance and consider

**hiatus** (hī-ā'tēs) *n.* a gap or break in continuity

**deficit** (dĕf'Y-sĭt) *n.* a shortfall or deficiency

**A DISTINGUISH FACT FROM OPINION**

Is the last statement in this paragraph a fact or an opinion? Explain your answer.

**B ARGUMENT**

What evidence does Quindlen supply in lines 76–88 to support her claim? Add this evidence to your chart.

1. **parlance** (pār'ləns): a particular manner of speaking.

2. **quantified**: expressed as a number or quantity.

**prestigious**

(prĕ-stĕ'jĕs) *adj.* having a great reputation; highly respected

**contemptuous**

(kən-tĕmp'chōō-es) *adj.* scornful or disrespectful

**laudable** (lō'də-bəl) *adj.* worthy of high praise

**C DISTINGUISH FACT FROM OPINION**

Reread lines 109–126. What fact does Quindlen include to support her opinion that parents have too little leisure time?

**D GRAMMAR AND STYLE**

Reread lines 150–163. Quindlen uses **rhetorical questions** to make the idea of doing nothing sound more appealing than the usual summertime activities.

the meaning of life and how come your nose in pictures never looks the way you think it should, but  
100 instead will get into trouble. There is also the culture of cutthroat and unquestioning competition that leads even the parents of preschoolers to gab about **prestigious** colleges without a trace of irony: this suggests that any class in which you do not enroll your first grader will put him at a disadvantage in, say, law school.

Finally, there is a culture of  
110 workplace presence (as opposed to productivity). Try as we might to suggest that all these enrichment activities are for the good of the kid, there is ample evidence that they are really for the convenience of parents with way too little leisure time of their own. Stories about the resignation of presidential aide Karen Hughes unfailingly reported her  
120 dedication to family time by noting that she arranged to get home at 5:30 one night a week to have dinner with her son. If one weekday dinner out of five is considered **laudable**, what does that say about what's become commonplace? **C**

Summer is coming. It used to be a time apart for kids, a respite from the clock and the copybook, the  
130 organized day. Every once in a while, either guilty or overwhelmed or tired of listening to me keen<sup>3</sup> about my monumental boredom, my mother would send me to some rinky-dink park program that consisted almost entirely of three-legged races and making things out of Popsicle sticks.

Now, instead, there are music camps, sports camps, fat camps, probably  
140 thin camps. I mourn hanging out in the backyard. I mourn playing Wiffle ball in the street without a sponsor and matching shirts. I mourn drawing in the dirt with a stick.

Maybe that kind of summer is gone for good. Maybe this is the leading edge of a new way of living that not only has no room for contemplation but is **contemptuous**  
150 of it. But if downtime cannot be squeezed during the school year into the life of frantic and often joyless activity with which our children are saddled while their parents pursue frantic and often joyless activity of their own, what about summer? Do most adults really want to stand in line for Space Mountain or sit in traffic to get to a shore house that  
160 doesn't have enough saucepans? Might it be even more enriching for their children to stay at home and do nothing? For those who **D** say they will only watch TV or play on the computer, a piece of technical advice: the cable box can be unhooked, the modem removed. Perhaps it is not too late for American kids to be given the  
170 gift of enforced boredom for at least a week or two, staring into space, bored out of their gourds, exploring the inside of their own heads. "To contemplate is to toil, to think is to do," said Victor Hugo. "Go outside and play," said Prudence Quindlen. Both of them were right.

3. **keen**: cry out in grief.