

Podcast 249 Backyard Activities 12:40

Today we're going to talk about backyard activities.

Let's pray. Father, thank You that we have families. Thank You we have things to do, and thank You that so far we still have the freedom to do them in. And I pray that You will bless our episode today and give us ears to hear what Your Spirit is saying to each of us, those of us right here recording and those that are listening at a later date. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I'm going to reminisce just a little bit because sometimes as parents, we try to do for our children, things that we didn't have done for us. We also try to raise our kids like we wish we'd been raised. And we seek to do unto others as we would wish they had done unto us. As I've reflected as I prepared for this particular podcast, that's what I'm thinking about.

I grew up in a subdivision. It wasn't a cul-de-sac, but it was a kind of a loop and there wasn't a lot of traffic. We lived at the end of this loop. There were a lot of young families with boys living close to us. I did the math one time, and there were ten boys either a year older than me or a year younger than me, which is average of 1.2 boys close to my age per house. There were only two unfortunate girls that lived in our subdivision. That poor girl couldn't even touch us. We'd spray ourselves because of her cooties.

I never had to use a telephone because there were so many boys at hand and we did life together year-round. I remember making snow forts in the winter. Playing football in our backyard in the fall and whiffle ball in the summer. It was a nice baseball field because it was set up with a left field kind made up of a hill of ivy. We played so many games in the summer, the base patches were worn into the grass. Fortunately, my dad wasn't a freak about grass. We were engaged in sports all year long. We also played in the woods. We had acres and acres of woods bordering our houses.

I remember the few times that we did things with our parents, and it was usually when other families would come to our house for a Memorial Day picnic or a Fourth of July picnic. I particularly recall playing softball with grown men when I was about 12. It was a great experience because I never forgot it. What helps is seeing old movies of these family events.

Because of these special times, I wanted to do similar things with my kids. Since we never lived in a subdivision with our kids, Sandi and I had to serve as the playmates for special events. We lived in the country and there weren't a lot of other boys around. There weren't a lot of activities nearby. I was also shy about enrolling in sports programs since they can be so all consuming. In my opinion sports in America today is way out of control.

Old Fashioned Little League

If baseball is your sport, you play fall baseball, summer baseball, spring baseball, and instead of a few months in the summer, you end up playing it year-round. When I was growing up, we had two months for baseball. You had two, three months for basketball, you had two months for football, and my buddies and I, just played whatever sport was in season. Another unique feature of sports then is if I was on a certain Little League baseball team, automatically my two brothers were assigned to the same team when they were old enough to play. Families would go to a ball field, and there might be a game for my younger brothers at one end, while I'm playing on the big team up on the large field. That way, the whole family went to the baseball game together. After the game we all went out to get ice cream together. And when you looked around the perimeter of the field, you saw the all the neighborhood families in their lawn chairs.

Baseball season was pro-family and only two months during June and July, and then it was over. A month later and we were heading back to school at the end of August. This was a golden era. The fields were close enough and it was safe so we rode our bikes back and forth to practices with our glove over the handle.

Family Activities

As I look back, I see the seeds of much of what I wanted to do with my kids. Sandi and I tried to be intentional about having activities we could do as a family. One game we liked was croquet. You can set up a croquet court pretty much anywhere. We played in our front yard or we played in our backyard, depending on where we were living. There are six colors and six balls, so we all were able to play at the same time and it was wonderful. Plus I often won, so we kept playing. So croquet was a fun family activity, and you don't have to be big and strong, you just have to be able to hit that ball.

We fly kites together. I always liked flying kites and I think it was the influence of "Mary Poppins," one of my favorite movies growing up. Even as a teenager, I enjoyed "Mary Poppins."

Because of Johnny, who is my son with Down Syndrome, we often played Duck, Duck, Goose. Six people are not enough for a good game, but anytime a family would come to visit us, Duck, Duck, Goose was the order of the day. We used to attend Bible schools in New Hampshire, and every night after dinner, we played Duck, Duck, Goose. It became so popular, we had two circles of people running around playing Duck, Duck, Goose.

At the end of the day I was tired. I had responsibilities and just wanted to rest, but Johnny would come up to me, tap me on the head, and say, "Duck, Duck, Goose!" I would take a deep breath and organize a game of Duck, Duck, Goose.

We also played Hide and Seek as a family. Of course, we played that inside as well as outside. We had some wonderful Hide and Seek games in our home. We'd turn

out all the lights, and all six of us would participate. Sometimes Johnny would tell us where the other people were hiding. Older people are more wise about where to hide, but they can't get into so many small places. The younger people that can fit into a plethora of small places. You can make your own rules, you know. We used to make rules, like the first person to get caught would be "It" the next game. Sometimes we played that whoever was caught helped them catch the rest of the folks.

We also played a version of whiffle ball. Since we had a wide disparity of skill levels, we played with that big red bat that was probably four or five inches in diameter at the end with a big white ball instead of the small little original whiffle balls. That way even the little kids had a good chance of hitting the ball. If they were unable, I directed them to hold their bat out so I could bounce it off of their bat and they could run around.

Church Picnic

The activities that we did in our home, we'd pass those on to other families when they would come to visit us. We gathered in our yard and played whiffle ball, croquet, or Duck, Duck, Goose. Once we had a church picnic, and I taught our small congregation how to play sports with the all members of the family participating.

As you know, I'm oriented this way, and we during the planning meeting for the event, I noticed the discussion was directed to splitting up families according to age. One person asked, "Who's going to take the younger kids?" Then they suggested finding a good a video for them. I countered, "Hey, let's do things together as families." Some folks were skeptical but agreed to give it a try.

I then taught them how to play whiffle ball and divided up everybody that wanted to play into two teams of fourteen players per team. The kids were as young as three years old all the way up to old people like me in their 40s at that time. We made some rules like, everybody getting to bat each inning chronologically. The younger people bat first, all the way up to the older people who bat last. We still had outs and kept score. We had a great time and I think it was an eye opener to some of the families. They thought, "Wow, we can do things with our own kids instead of having to join a league or having to go to organized sports or something!"

Organized Sports

I noticed that the way we do organized sports was not only a year round activity, it was a serious investment of time, especially when you have multiple kids playing on different teams and in different places. Families were being harried and split up. I know people who have their kids are on three different teams in three different leagues, and mom has to take one kid, and one kid has to go with a neighbor, and dad has to take the other kid, and they live in minivans. When I observed this I thought, "Really? Is that what I want my family to do?"

There are drawbacks to my approach since my kids never became as accomplished athletes. But I comfort myself by remembering, “How many times have I played organized sports since I left my Little League days or my Pony League days, or even when I played in high school a little bit and college?” You hardly ever participate in an 18 man softball or baseball game as an adult, unless you are in a league, which I never did since it would take away family time. I came to the conclusion that the cost for organized sports was way greater than the fruit or what benefit we would get from it.

Paintball

I recall when my sons expressed an interest in playing wanted paintball. I dragged my heels a little bit about it, and then finally we agreed, “Okay, you can play paintball with slingshots and you have to wear work goggles.” We thought this was a good compromise, but we discovered they posed their own danger. They didn’t just have old fashioned slingshots; they had these things called wrist rockets.

We finally acquiesced to letting them save their money for paintball guns with the little CO2 cartridges that went in them. The paint ball went much slower and you could watch the paintball come out of the end of the barrel. Our kids began with wrist rockets, and then progressed to paintballs with all their buddies from church out in the woods behind our house. Pretty soon, they sold it to me and said, “Come on, you can play. We want you to play.”

I used a gun but just was a target! I couldn’t hide behind the trees, and all I had was a heavy rugby shirt with blue and yellow stripes. I looked like a big bumblebee. I’d be out in the woods, and they could see me no matter where I hid. There was no trees big enough to hide me. However I have this competitive part of me, too, so Johnny went to our local Kmart and bought camo. By this point, the guys had taken up their level of technology and weren’t using their little CO2 cartridges, they had purchased regular paintball guns, and they got me one for Father’s Day. It was called a Spider Elite, which I still have.

I learned that paintball can be fun, as fun as long as you don’t get hit. I also learned something about friendly fire, because Johnny was usually on my team, and I had to make sure I knew where he was so he wouldn’t shoot me. We had a good time playing paintball. The last time we played, I didn’t get hit. I don’t bring that up very much, because – and my one son, who was really good at paintball, I mean he was fast, and man, could he shoot. And I’ve got my sniper kids who just hide there and wait for you to do something wrong, and they’re patient, and that is not me. I would stand up, and I remember one time trying to get the game moving a little bit, and I just jumped out into the middle of my line and I said, “Hey!” And my face mask exploded in paint. Ethan’s paintball hit me square between the eyes! Fortunately, we had masks and I couldn’t see anything, but I thought, “Wow, he’s a good shot.” And

then, so I caught him creeping up around us one time, and somehow his hat had fallen off, and I ended up hitting him three times in the head with an adrenaline rush. I heard him groaning, and I said, "I'm sorry, son!" So for those of you who wonder if you'll be able to shoot paintballs at your children, I didn't have any trouble, especially since I was aware they would be shooting me if I didn't get them first!

Swords

Another event I recall is when Isaac ordered real swords. That had the potential to be very dangerous, and I encouraged them to make fake swords out of wood covered with carpet padding and some duct tape, so they did. And I remember looking out the driveway one night, and a bunch of kids were gathered around Isaac who was teaching them all sorts of sword fighting techniques. They had a variety of weapons including lances and scimitars all made of wood, foam, and duct tape.

As a family we purchased a couple canoes which we stuck in the back of our trailer for family outings. I always liked canoeing, and I have fond memories of canoeing as a kid. Now we have kayaks, and Johnny and I kayak pretty regularly at a local lake, and we just go out in the evening and paddle around the lake.

Bikes, etc.

We own a variety of bikes. I was out for a bike ride last night. John has trouble balancing so he has wheel stabilizers on his bike, or we ride our tandem bike. I'm trying to stimulate your imagination and encourage you to find something that fits your family. You don't have to be an expert. I'm not a fan of the idea that you have to pick one thing and become the best of the best of the best, as they say in "Men in Black." For those of you that are ultra-competitive, dial it back a little bit and be encouraging. This is not the Olympics; this is your family. And just give them some skills and do some stuff and have fun.

Scott: Man, I was so thankful for Nerf toys for my kids, because we never had those things when I was a kid. I mean, we had the Nerf footballs and the Nerf soccer balls and whatever, but they had Nerf swords and Nerf guns and stuff. And they had little soft bullets they shoot at each other. But even those, they've gotten to the point when they can shoot pretty far and pretty hard. But they would whack the heck out of each other with those Nerf swords to the point where they were crying from that.

Steve: Our kids have good imaginations, and my wife and I liked to participate with them whenever we could. I've already mentioned on a previous episode that we played disc golf because that house that we lived in for fifteen years, and where we did most of our raising of our boys, was almost two acres. It was on the edge of

woods, and a stream ran through our property, so we made our own disc golf course. Almost every evening in the summer, we'd go out after dinner and play nine holes of disc golf, all of us. We each had our own discs and our own playing styles. Last Thursday night, I had three of my boys and I played at a local course. I was beaming and I just felt so rich as a dad. I won, too.

Let's pray: Father, thank You for family. Help us to celebrate it and work with You in building it, and give us ideas, and give us a spirit of camaraderie, and bless our families as you turn fathers' hearts toward home and turn children's hearts toward their fathers. In Jesus name, Amen.