

# Dadlands

## Wild Childhood

By Thomas Hayden

I didn't grow up in San Francisco. I suppose that explains how my wife and I ended up at Candlestick Point State Recreation Area with our 1-year-old son.

We were desperate to get out of the house, and the strip of land out beyond the stadium looked green on the map. It was... OK. But when we packed up to leave, our son threw his arms around a scraggly live oak and refused to budge. Candlestick Park wasn't a neglected eyesore to him. With its meandering trails, chubby California ground squirrels, and wheeling red-tailed hawks, this scruffy, overlooked corner of San Francisco was wilderness on a toddler scale.

San Franciscans are surrounded by nature on a far grander scale. From the rolling breakers of Half Moon Bay to the crisp white slopes of the Sierras, our northern California neighborhood is practically defined by majestic natural treasures. Well that, and traffic. Sure, the Marin headlands are spectacular, but after a couple of toddler meltdowns on a gridlocked Golden Gate Bridge, we were ready to start seeking out wild spots much, much closer to home.

If you live near Land's End or the woodlands of Golden Gate Park, your children are probably not suffering from nature deficit disorder. But what about the rest of us? My family lives in the southeastern corner of the city; with two kids under four, visiting most any location in *Good Night, San Francisco* is a day trip. But, by shifting your perspective, there are scores of smaller, more obscure, or simply overlooked patches of wilderness nearby, almost anywhere you live.

Ecologists have a name for patches and corners of the world we humans have built, but that wild plants and animals are reclaiming: novel ecosystems. Sure,

underused parks and undeveloped patches of land lack the grandeur of Yosemite, but in a world where even the most pristine environments are threatened, they can become ecological refugia, crucial safe zones where species can hang on, and even thrive. So long as there's a little open ground—enough trees for a 3-year-old to hide in and flowers for a 1-year-old to pull—these overlooked spots can become wild-enough refuges for nature-starved city kids too.

At this point, we've probably clocked



more hours at Candlestick than Willie Mays. You might also find us trekking the pathways of John McLaren Park, or joining the Hill Babies hiking group on San Bruno Mountain or South San Francisco's Sign Hill Park. We also love Heron's Head Park, where you can feed the weed-clearing goats in the morning, then spend long afternoon hours on the sheltered crescent of beach, digging in the sand and tossing stones into the bay.

We keep a battered old backpack stuffed with dry clothes, hearty snacks, and plenty of fresh diapers and wipes. Add a towel, a mini first-aid kit, and some shelf-stable milks, and we're ready for nearly any adventure or emergency. If there's one thing that connects urban wilderness to the back

country, after all, it's the lack of warming huts and bathroom facilities.

The views aren't, for the most part, stirring. From Candlestick, there's a panorama of Hunter Point's abandoned naval shipyard; Heron's Head features dilapidated docks, a concrete-crushing operation, and a massive recycling center. For kids, garbage barges and heavy machinery can bring as much joy as new bunnies and rainbows. But I was surprised by how quickly my son and daughter filtered them out, once immersed in the serious business of collecting broken shells and building houses and dams out of reeds. Kids in nature, no matter how patchy, aren't just unplugged from devices and distractions. They're plugged into exactly the kind of sensory exploration and imaginative play that so many "educational" toys and apps claim to facilitate.

For my family, finding nature in San Francisco has meant shifting our focus from the spectacular to the accessible. We love the redwoods and mountains, but young children have a way of shrinking a family's geography—and not just because they're lousy travelers.

For kids, every tree is a giant, and a sheltered spot under spindly branches can hold the full measure of attraction that Yosemite Valley held for Ansel Adams. I've come to see nature in a new light as a result—as something smaller, more intimate, and closer to home. Exploring that nature with my kids has made me local in a way that merely living and working in the city somehow never did.

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