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## Most Parents Have Been On A Field Trip From Hell — Here's My Story

**BY JOSEPH WILSON**

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I've been on lots of field trips with my daughters' classes. From pottery to apple picking, ice skating to gardening, field trips are a wonderful way to remind kids that the world outside their classroom isn't put on pause when the school bell rings in the morning.

When they descend the school bus and see a maple syrup shack or the dome at the Ontario Science Centre, they are confronted with the giddy paradox that they are "in school" but not "at school." You can forgive them for getting a little unhinged.

I've become a pro at corralling kids into lines, counting heads and memorizing shirt colours. When we get to a new place, I block the exit with my body like a game-seven goalie swatting away pucks.

**Relevant Reading:** Your Kids Won't Remember All The Things You Did To Make Their Lives Better (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/your-kids-might-not-remember-all-youve-ever-done-to-make-their-life-better>)

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The most important factor, though, in keeping things from erupting into *Lord of the Flies* territory, is the teacher.

One year, at High Park with a class of kindergarten students, I thought we were doomed. The kids had just finished a relatively coherent activity planting annuals in a pot. (By that I mean one kid was chasing a butterfly, one was throwing worms and another was trying to eat the plants.) The teacher hadn't created specific groups for the parents to supervise, didn't know the schedule of the day and didn't even have a class list.

We were due, at some point, at the High Park zoo, which, according to the map, was a couple of hundred metres to the east. The teacher decided the best way to inspire order in our feral flock was to lead the students on an impromptu walk through the woods.

"I know a shortcut," she said.

"Have you been here before?" I asked.

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Counting children who are playing outside is like trying to count cells multiplying in a petri dish.

"No, but someone told me there was a path."

"Hmm, I'm not sure that's such a good..."

"HEAD COUNT!" she yelled.

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Parents stood around awkwardly trying to scoop kids into their groups. Some of the students had left early with their parents on the TTC, some hadn't arrived yet and some were sick. Did I mention the teacher didn't have a class list?

**Relevant Reading:** When I Say No, Why I Say No and When I Let My Kids Take the Lead (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/kids-want-you-to-say-no>)

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I showed her that there was a staircase that lead down to the zoo just a short walk up the road, but she wanted them to experience the forest, a natural oasis in the middle of the city. Not wanting to be accused of hating nature, I agreed.

We set off down a ragged path, single file, peeling back overgrown weeds. There were close to 30 children (you'll understand why I don't exactly know), 12 parents and at least four strollers. The strollers needed to be carried, one parent at each end, like a throne transported by servants.

After about ten minutes, the teacher decided this wasn't the correct path, so she stopped walking. This message took a while to propagate down the line, until the parent in the rearguard position, with a stroller on his shoulders, confusedly turned around. We retraced our steps until the teacher found an even tinier path splitting off the first, and enthusiastically jumped into the bush.

We trudged along, descending into a deep ravine, a geographical feature not evident on the PDF map the teacher had printed from the internet. We came upon the first of many fallen trees, as wide as many of the six-year old kids were tall. The parents formed a line and unceremoniously passed the kids over the tree like a series of sandbags.

Eventually, muddy and scratched, we broke out of the woods into a wide, grassy field. The kids, more subdued, walked in single file. There was nobody on the expanse of cut grass, nothing between us and a line of zoo-like fences on the other side. Nothing, that is, except a lone, red dodgeball that was left in the grass, a temptation presented as a test of self-control.

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The teacher could have chosen any number of paths across the field, but she seemed to be heading straight for the ball. Didn't she see it? Didn't she know what would happen? We approached it and she seemed surprised to find a ball lying in the grass. Instead of ignoring it, she picked it up.

"Everybody, listen up, I don't want anybody to play with this ball!" she said.

"Don't do it," I thought to myself, knowing what was coming. She threw the ball into the grass, the kids eyeing it like cats on a hunt. There was a brief beat as the kids considered their fate. Then they pounced — 30 kids fighting for one glorious red ball in an open field.

"I told you not to play with it!" yelled the teacher.

After a few minutes of cajoling, the ball was finally snatched back by the teacher. This, naturally, became a spirited game of keep-away.

We eventually made it to the zoo and the kids scattered amidst the pens. Some of them yelled at the llamas while others made fart noises at the peacock. It was a rich learning environment.

**Relevant Reading:** You're Doing a Great Job — An Open Letter to Parents

Everywhere (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/youre-doing-a-great-job-an-open-letter-to-parents-everywhere>)

We took the stairs back up to the meet the bus. Except the bus was waiting at the other parking lot on the other side of the park. We only found that out later, though, because the teacher didn't have a cell phone.

Eventually we made it out of there. I think all the kids made it back to the school? There they recounted their adventures to their friends — legends grown from the giddy possibility of the field trip. It was anarchy out there: an intoxicating mix of overgrown jungles and free dodgeballs.

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