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Magic journey made simple

Are after school activities really worth it, when so much of life is free? A trip to a farmers' market was the wake-up call for **Jules Ritter** and her daughter

The economic downturn has few, if any, advantages but one may be the forced effect of having to cut back on all those expensive extra-curriculum activities for our children. When I was growing up, a typical after-school activity amounted to the preparation of a banana and sugar sandwich to eat in front of *Blue Peter* or, if I was feeling really generous, taking our dog Snowy for a much-needed walk. As a mother myself, however, I have joined the frantic after-school bandwagon of those fellow parents who ferry overachieving children to numerous clubs, music lessons and sports activities. But I left it all behind when I had my own epiphany on this very subject while standing in our local farmer's market next to my eight-year-old daughter, Alexia.

It was the late blueberries that did it. Clustered in a plywood basket, the wild mountain blueberries – *Vaccinium myrtillus* – caught Alexia's attention and finally pressed the "pause" button on our lives.

With Alexia I was a late mother at 39, and she, my third and last child, was running alongside as I kept pace with her two teenage siblings. It was a case of been there, done that when she came along. I had already patted hundreds of dogs, sat for hours in playgrounds and picnicked myself to the point of an aversion to Tupperware. But that morning in the market, as I watched her standing on tiptoes, her small hand reaching to take hold of the handle, drawing the basket slowly towards her and willing the berries not to spill, I realised it was a salutary moment in her ephemeral life and one I could so easily have missed. I felt a visceral shift, the voice of the heart being heard, for once, above the chatter of the head and the car engine driving



us to places we don't need to go, and the television telling us things we don't always need to hear, and the computers drawing us into a bigger world than any of us can ever imagine. Constant consumerism has taken over our lives, giving us frantic minds and blinding us to the real magic of life – the magic that can be found in something as simple as an eight year old's wonderment, if only we would all just slow down and look.

The day following our trip to the market, Alexia and I set out to pick blackberries in the rain with our aged golden retriever, Molly. Two hours later we returned soaking wet with a paltry six blackberries but had both had a glorious time chattering away in the hushed beauty of a rain-drenched forest. Talking with children in this way, ambling along peacefully in the



The good life: from left, children collect blueberries; mother and daughter bake biscuits; and a family expedition in the countryside



CHEAP AND CHEERFUL ACTIVITIES TO ENJOY WITH YOUR CHILDREN

- ❖ Cooking together – make jam/chutney from wild berries or windfalls.
- ❖ Helping with the chores (give child own apron and duster)
- ❖ Varnishing or painting (own paint brush).
- ❖ Nature walks – the muddier the better and the expedition should include a few dead animals.
- ❖ Collecting – flowers and leaves, annotated and pressed into a book or a traditional flower press.
- ❖ Biscuit making – buy some cheap interestingly shaped cutters, angels, trees, snow men, stars and so on, and use with any leftover pastry.
- ❖ Start a memory box together for the best drawings, the first school books, class photographs, favourite pieces of clothing and the outgrown toys that are too precious to throw away.

What children really want and need is our undivided full attention

irritated parents. We are avoiding meaningful interaction and are in danger of creating shallow beings incapable of enjoying their own company. They may be Tai Chi champions at age seven with a social life to rival Paris Hilton's, but they are often incapable of climbing a tree or putting a thoughtful sentence together that is not lazily peppered with the abhorrent slang word "like".

What children really want and need, in my opinion, is our undivided, full attention for a few hours a day and time to themselves to just be.

Perhaps these difficult economic times will prove to us that the best things in life really are free. One obvious way to help lessen the economic load would be to ditch all the unnecessary extra-curricula activities and invest instead in some sturdy waterproof clothing, a pair of wellies and an old dog.

I certainly see now that I have been trying to do far too much with Alexia and that it is simply being with her that I need more of; being in the here and now of her incredible journey.

❖ Jules Ritter publishes a blog on life as a writer in Switzerland at www.julesritter.com

moment without clock watching, takes in a different rhythm, full of comforting pauses and heartfelt sentences uttered while gazing off into the middle distance. It is a welcome change to the usual shouted instructions that pass for conversation when trying to get children into the car at the same time as searching the washing machine for a mouth guard

left in the pocket of a pair of rugby shorts.

I fear we have got ourselves into a terrible tangle doing too much with our children in the mistaken belief we are doing them good: shunting them from one activity/club/party to another; piling them, wide-eyed with fatigue, into the backs of cars and making them sit in traffic jams with us, the