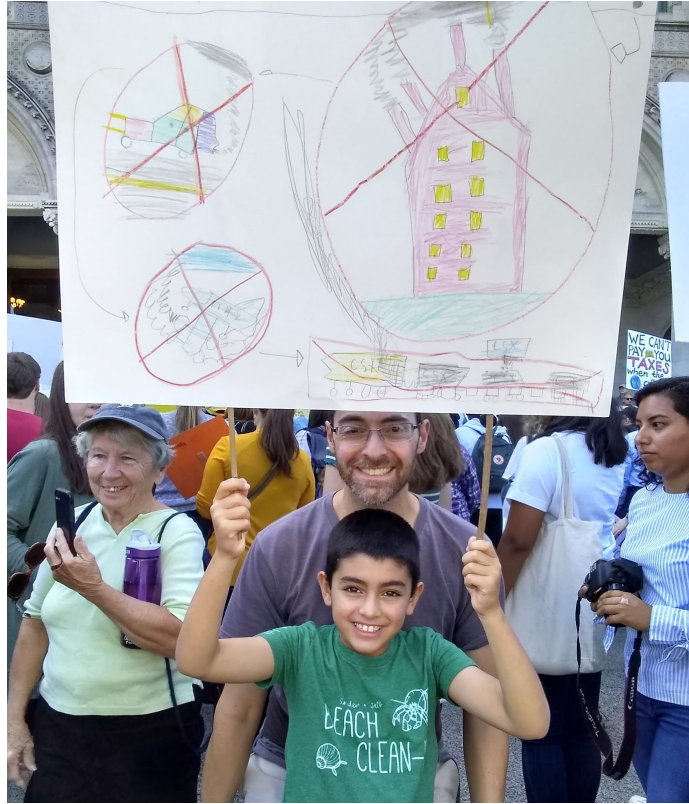


Raising an Ecowarrior: The Early Childhood Years



By Erik Assadourian

Nearly four years ago I wrote in [Adbusters](#) about how I had been raising my son to be an ecowarrior. At the time, he was just three. So there wasn't much to it: supporting my wife, Aynabat, in breastfeeding; keeping my son, Ayhan, away from screens; getting him outside and letting him eat dirt; and spending oceans of time with him from day one, no matter how monotonous. Yes, sometimes it was a slog, with the hours slowly ticking by while we rocked Ayhan, talked baby-talk, or sang yet another rendition of "Five Little Monkeys." Or as we fed and changed him, and especially as we scraped his shit out of cloth diapers, washed those vinegary rags, and hung them on the clothesline.

Yes, those were some long days, especially in the early going—days when my wife and I actually fought over who'd get the privilege of washing the dishes, just to get a bit of Zen time.

But so many of the moments were incredible. Ayhan's first laughs, his first teeth, his first words, his first steps, his first efforts to wash dishes (now he's busy and we can relax!)—and as a game-loving father, his first games. Not just my picking up Sophie Giraffe after he'd thrown it from his stroller for the twelfth time, giggling, with Papa playing along, but chasing him around the playground, and especially playing board games.

And as my son turns seven, time with him is still as joyful, maybe even more. He's a little man now, playing serious games, learning karate, romping through the woods, helping around the house, having deep conversations, making up stories, learning about the world, and joining me at community events, meetings, and protests.

I wondered, when I finished the first "Raising a Future Ecowarrior" essay, what I might say in the future that would translate as easily to other families. In particular, I was interested in the early childhood stage, about how they're living and what they're learning—especially as my wife and I have chosen to have only one child and to homeschool him.

I realize now that there are a number of lessons I can share. Here are some rules of thumb my wife and I have found most valuable over seven years of homeschooling our little son and ecowarrior.

Go Outside and Get Moving

I'm still proud that we got rid of our stroller when Ayhan was two years old. Living in DC with no car, we walked and rode public transport everywhere. So getting Ayhan's legs conditioned for life beyond the stroller put him on the right path for being active and strong. That's not changed. He's lean and powerful—as I rediscover whenever I try to tickle him and get a knee to the jaw. (We're about out of the tickling stage now because of that, a sad stage of development.)

Much of our early outside time together was in the highly engineered modern "playground" urban dwellers are familiar with. At best, they are quasi-natural structures in a sea of woodchips, with some potential to stimulate creativity. At worst, they're hot, rubberized hellholes, where toddlers leave covered in toxic plastic beads (which probably end up in their stomachs, as well).

In our hundreds of hours exploring playgrounds, we slid down slides, played on swings, chased each other, and played with other children. Sometimes I played along or sat back to get a rest and reflected sadly on how most other parents are far more engaged with their phones than their kids or the other parents.

I recognize that for parents needing a break, the phone is a magical portal—to news, a game, a video, a conversation, or an excuse to not engage with others. The constancy of smartphone use on playgrounds suggests addiction more than distraction, however. This is behavior that kids, quickly recognizing the covetous value of the smartphone, will mimic in the future.

Beyond the playground adventures, we'd garden in our car-sized DC yard. Ayhan would help me compost, tear up the garden (thinking he was helping me plant), and play in the dirt. And as he got older we started to regularly explore Rock Creek Park, hiking, building dams in the creek tributaries, even guerilla pruning, once I learned how to prune properly (thanks [Casey Trees!](#)).

A year ago, we moved to Middletown, Connecticut—a walkable town that also seemed very resilient to the coming climate crisis (and far more affordable than DC). On the one hand, wilderness was more accessible; on the other, for the most part, we now had to drive to it (a barrier in itself for an environmentalist who hates driving). We've continued to hike and join naturalists' explorations, and do some camping. And we also got a plot at a community garden—which kept us gardening and taught us an important lesson in what happens when invasives send out their seeds just as you till the earth (it's not pretty).

Then, this past fall, as I had been in Connecticut for six months and acculturated to the norm that “20 minutes of driving is close,” this opened up the option that “nearby” was a primitive skills homeschool group that met once a week. At Ayhan’s age, it’s mostly just playing—but playing with a purpose, such as games like Fire in the Forest that teach basic safety and awareness drills—and as he gets older they add in skills like bow drill, camouflage, bark basket weaving, and so on. Most importantly he’s in the woods for six hours every Tuesday, where he learns to be comfortable in cold, hot, wet, dry, and snowy weather. And he is surrounded by birds, trees, and mentors who recognize the inherent value of a living Earth.

Finally, there’s Karate. It may not be as important as nature time, but it’s a close second, as it teaches respect, discipline, confidence, and an understanding that on those few occasions where one must fight, a few well-placed strikes will disable your opponent. At the Washin-Ryu Dojo in Middletown (an easy bike ride away), classes consist of both adults and children, with the children—including the Orange-belted Ayhan—even teaching forty- and fifty-year-olds how to properly perform Karate kata.

My sobering thought here is that Ayhan needs Karate because the future will be a bleak one where conflict will inevitably increase. I’m not going to lie: at this point I don’t see a realistic pathway out of our unsustainable consumer society other than through the rough road of civilizational collapse. And in that world, self-defense will be essential.

Stay Inside and Learn Languages

I once asked a knowledgeable colleague: “What one thing would you teach children to ready them for the world that’s coming?” Without hesitation came his answer: languages. He explained how they create opportunities, improve economic options—the data shows that they even improve brain health (increasing self-control and reducing the odds of dementia).

I took that to heart. Luckily I’m married to a trilingual woman. Aynabat, a Turkmen, speaks Russian and Turkmen and has taught Ayhan Russian from day one. They read countless Russian stories, practice Cyrillic writing, even surprise me when she reads *Gulliver’s Travels*, *Animal Farm*, and *How to Train Your Dragon* to him—in Russian! Turkmen she added a year ago but he’s taking to it—though there isn’t an accessible Turkmen-speaking community like there is a Russian one. Living just down the hill from Wesleyan University now, we have found a Spanish tutor to add a fourth language. While my son’s third and fourth languages certainly won’t be at the level of his first and second, if all goes well, he’ll have a handful of them—and their corresponding cultural worlds—to draw upon as he grows up. The idea is as valuable as it is revolutionary in the Monolingual States of America.

Stay Off Screens and Do Chores

We made a decision from the beginning to keep Ayhan away from screens. Other than video calls, Ayhan didn’t get any screen time until he turned two (which the World Health Organization recommends). Even after two, his screen time has been minimal—less than 30 minutes a day (from years 2 to 7). Once in a while we’ll watch for an hour, then days will go by with no time for cartoons as we’re too busy with forest school or karate, or playing a game.

When we do watch, surprisingly little of it comprises cartoons. We watch nature documentaries, or the Electric Company (from the ‘70s), or *Bill Nye the Science Guy*. Then there are the *Magic School Bus*, *Octonauts*, and *Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot about That*. The choices get even more exotic when it’s

Aynabat's turn to pick: classic Soviet cartoons like *Cheburashka* or *Three from Prostokvashino*. With his love of trains we even watch shows like *Mumbai Railway* and the NOVA documentary *Why Trains Crash*. (Ayhan is surely one of the few seven-year olds that can tell you what Positive Train Control is.)

The Amish have a rule that's always made sense to me: that, by seven, children should "break even," giving to the household as much as they get. We've been working to make sure Ayhan does his part. While we do battle over dishes—he dislikes them—he is solely responsible for trash and recycling. He also hangs and folds the laundry, picks up around the house, and vacuums. He often resists doing his chores, of course, but he does get them done, which I'm happy about. That he sees both his parents cleaning regularly, and doesn't have an easily accessible distraction—i.e., a screen—makes it easy to get him to be fully engaged. And it makes our lives a lot easier. The next step—both for the life skill and the parental relief—is teaching Ayhan to cook.

Get Out and Into the Community

With his first years being in DC, Ayhan had many chances to engage with the world. Ayhan joined his first march when he was three, when a group of Bernie Sanders supporters marched by our house, and we tagged along. Sure we only walked only a few blocks and he had no idea what any of it was about, but growing up with Trump as president, he's quickly found out. Ayhan joined more protests—the Women's March, the Climate March, the Science March—and even helped me as I created an anti-Trump card game. (So became very knowledgeable about presidential politics.)

Then in 2018, after several years of contemplating a move to Middletown, CT, I got offered a job there, in which I organized and joined many community events. Aynabat (and I to a lesser degree) had drilled Ayhan in manners and emotional intelligence from an early age: *Look into people's eyes. Ask "How are you?" Shake their hands firmly.* This year I brought him to many of the events I organized: repair cafes, hikes, boat trips, beach cleanups. And Ayhan has excelled at being a polite helper—cleaning up trash, making participants feel engaged and welcomed, making signs. Just writing this, I realize how proud I am of him.

I'm not sure what has led to this—positive reinforcement to a large degree, and perhaps the fact that he's never seen a screen in public (other than those annoying TVs that seem to be in most restaurants now). So he looks actively for interaction rather than distraction. But this year was a great time to test all that out and strengthen many of the lessons. Over the years, I hope this community engagement will become even stronger and more self-directed. Being right downtown, he'll soon be able to walk to community meetings on his own, if he so chooses (his current career ambition is to be the mayor of Middletown and a metro engineer, so perhaps). It'll be interesting if a boy chooses to engage and

THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF DEATH FOR KIDS?

What is the correct level of exposure to the "real" for a child? Ayhan has watched a rabbit and turkey being slaughtered. He's also seen (in documentaries) animals killing each other—as well as real train accidents. Is a seven-year-old capable of processing this? Some would argue for sheltering children from this,—and from the horrors that climate change is bringing. I disagree.

Throughout history, children saw life and death firsthand. They weren't hidden away when loved ones died or animals were made into food. And when wars and famines came, they were part of that too. Well, "Winter is Coming" in the form of catastrophic climate change. Our children should be both physically and psychologically prepared for it. Sheltering your children from the harder parts of life, the disasters unspooling around us, will only incapacitate them.

whether he'd be taken seriously even if he did. Or maybe he'll choose to get involved in a more globally focused movement that takes youth more seriously. Time will tell.

Inside or Outside, Play All the Time

Much of the best learning can barely be called learning. We build Legos, read stories, write letters to faroff family, and play board game after board game. It's worth remembering the degree to which children used to learn through play—pretending to hunt, mimicking parents as they ground grain or cooked, tagging along with an uncle or aunt as they foraged, and so on. Learning doesn't have to be boring—it doesn't have to be “ok, this is official learning time.” Yes, there's some of that even with us—we have workbooks in both Russian and English we use to practice writing and spelling—and “workbook” is certainly his least favorite time of the day.

Instead, mostly we just play. As I write this, my work table is covered with SeaFall, a legacy game that consists of a series of about 15 games. It's meant for 12-year-olds but he and I are playing through the series, and having enormous fun —other than the time Ayhan's ship sunk! Games teach not just strategy but emotional control. As I always tell Ayhan, I still get very upset when I lose, and sometimes even want to cry. But as you grow up you just learn to tamp that down (which, sadly, is an important part of growing up).

This all feels a bit celebratory to me. There have been times when it was really hard—especially before he learned to walk, where he whined and clung to us so much we barely thought we could go on. And Ayhan, unfortunately, inherited his parents' temper. But we've been fortunate to have the time to set our son's path in a way that made him a kinder and more ecologically-grounded child.

Could I have done all this if he was in school all day?

I'm assuming no. We wouldn't have had time or energy to drag him to karate three times a week. He would've gotten far less outdoors time. Playing would be a rare treat, and the drudgery of workbooks more frequent.

There have been gaps in his education so far. We probably don't spend enough time writing instead of reading, and probably not enough time with math. But that's more than offset by other skills—especially awareness of nature, languages, and social/emotional intelligence.

Ultimately, the take home message is similar to that of the first three years. Feed your child well, keep him away from screens, get her outside, and play as much as possible. Processed foods rot the body and screens rot the brain, while nature—even a few trees or a community garden—nourishes the soul and reminds us of how beautiful and mysterious, and worth defending, Earth is.

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