

Let Them Be Kids

We sell leadership and resilience. The real value is often in the rock pool. Are we being honest about that?

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I have spent the last fifteen years designing outdoor and experiential education curricula for schools and organisations. Over time, I've arrived at a slightly uncomfortable conclusion: some of the most important parts of our programmes are the parts we leave out. The bits where young people get to stop performing and simply be themselves.

Last week brought it home again.

I spent a few days working with a group of teenagers. The programme had been sold as the be-all and end-all — the bee's knees. Leadership, resilience, independence, growth: all the words that make a proposal sound worth the money. And there was some plan behind it. Good staff, good intentions, good activities.

But the moment we reached the pool below the falls, the objectives melted away. They sat in the water. They splashed. A few started stacking stones into a dam and laughed every time it collapsed. Others just talked — no phones, no pressure, no one performing for anyone.

For a while, nobody was becoming a leader. They were just being kids.

And it was the best part of the day.

— The Question I Keep Coming Back To

We advertise these programmes on lofty outcomes. Leadership. Independence. Transformation. Sometimes those things genuinely happen — and sometimes the staff are properly trained to make them happen. But how honest are the adults — the organisations, the schools, the parents, and yes, practitioners like me — about what actually delivers the value on the ground?

I don't think most of us are lying. Where the dishonesty exists, it's rarely cynical. It's more that three different things are quietly true at once, and we only ever say one of them out loud.

The first is that the market rewards the lofty framing. You cannot win a booking, and it's hard to justify a fee to a parent or a budget line, by promising that thirty children will splash happily in a rock pool for an afternoon. So the language inflates to meet what makes the spend defensible. The proposal isn't lying so much as translating something quiet into something purchasable.

The second is harder to admit. We often believe the leadership and resilience outcomes are landing — because the feedback forms say so, and because the structured activities *look* like they produce them. But, as I've written before, the evidence for the sold goal is frequently manufactured by the measurement itself. Ask a tired teenager at the end of a long day, in front of their peers and their teachers, whether they've grown, and they'll tell you what they think you want to hear.

The third is the one that matters most. The real value often sits in the thing nobody put on the proposal. The dam-building. The stone-skimming. The talking with no agenda. We file it as downtime — and it may be the most important twenty minutes of the week.

— Why “Just Being a Kid” Is So Scarce

Here is the part that should give us pause, particularly in Hong Kong.

For a lot of the young people we work with, the outdoor programme is one of the very few places they are allowed to simply be children. Their ordinary week is relentless. A full day at school, then private tutoring, then homework that can stretch to 10 or 11pm at night.

This isn't an impression. Over half of Hong Kong's secondary students receive private tutoring, and in the final year of school that figure exceeds seventy per cent. Time-diary studies find students spending three to five hours a day on homework during peak periods. That is a working day layered on top of a working day.

And the toll is measurable. In 2024, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service surveyed more than 1,600 secondary students and found around a quarter experiencing depression serious enough to warrant professional help, with close to thirty per cent reporting anxiety. A Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups study of secondary students in the 2024–25 year found that nearly two-thirds had felt down, depressed or hopeless in the preceding fortnight — and almost thirty per cent had experienced thoughts of self-harm or suicide.

None of this is abstract to me.

A few years ago I was working in Beijing and Shanghai, with an organisation partnered with a renowned international education establishment. My brief was emotional intelligence — foundations and practical tools to help the students carry the load they were under. During one of the breaks, I got talking to a group of them, all around fourteen or fifteen. I asked what the biggest stressor in their lives was right now. The upcoming exams, they said, without hesitation.

So I dug a little further. Why is it a stressor? What are you actually worried about? The answers came back: not feeling prepared, not feeling they knew enough about particular parts of a subject. So — naively — I suggested study groups. If you're strong on this bit and someone else is strong on that bit, why not help each other?

The response stopped me. *We've been told we're not allowed to do that.*

The reality for these students is that they are marked on a bell curve. To a degree, it doesn't matter what score you achieve in an exam — it matters what everyone else achieves. And that had been made explicit to them: this is a competition between you and everyone around you. Helping a classmate is helping a rival.

With that in mind, is it any wonder these young people feel isolated, feel under relentless pressure, and feel they have no one to turn to and no one to talk to?

Read those numbers, then picture the rock pool again.

When a child from that world sits in moving water and builds a pointless, collapsing dam out of stones, something is happening that no leadership module can replicate. The pressure lifts. For once, nothing is being assessed. And in that space — and often only in that space — they reconnect with themselves, with each other, and with the world they're standing in.

So when we cram an outdoor programme full of objectives, debriefs and performance, we risk doing something absurd: importing the exact pressure the outdoors was supposed to relieve. We take the one environment that could let a child breathe, and we turn it into another place to perform.

— This Is Not an Argument Against Design

Let me be clear, because this is where the argument can tip over. “Let them be kids” is not a licence to abandon design and call it experiential education. A lovely afternoon in a rock pool does not automatically produce resilience, and unstructured time on its own transfers no better than an over-engineered programme does. I've made that case before, and I stand by it.

The point is subtler, and more demanding.

Watch what the children in that pool were actually doing. Building a dam with foresight and cooperation. Negotiating without a facilitator. Solving a real problem with real materials, for no reward beyond the doing of it. That is not the absence of learning. That is a beaver at work rather than a robot following instructions — self-directed, adaptive, and entirely unbothered by whether anyone is watching.

Connection — to yourself, to the people around you, to the world you inhabit — is not a gap between the real activities. For many young people, it is the most valuable thing we offer. The honest move is not to stop chasing outcomes. It is to name connection as a primary outcome in its own right, and then to design for it as deliberately as we design for anything else — rather than pretending the splashing is a break from the real programme, when it may *be* the real programme.

— What This Looks Like in Practice

- **Say what you actually deliver.** If connection and space to decompress are part of the value — and they are — put them in the proposal, not just the leadership language. Clients deserve the honest version.
- **Design the unstructured time.** “Free play” that earns its place is chosen, positioned and protected. Decide where it goes, what it's for, and why it matters — then guard it from the creep of more content.
- **Measure honestly, or don't claim it.** If you can't tell whether an outcome landed, don't sell it as guaranteed. A happy sheer at the end of a tiring day measures the experience, not the learning.
- **Count connection as an outcome.** Notice it, value it, and be willing to defend it to a client who wants every minute justified by a competency.
- **Let the pressure lift.** For young people carrying a relentless week, the most developmentally useful thing you can offer might be an hour where nothing is being assessed at all. Don't fill it just because you can.

The teenagers I worked with last week won't remember the objectives. They'll remember the dam that kept falling down, and the afternoon nobody asked them to be anything other than themselves.

That's not the part of the programme to apologise for. It might be the part that mattered most.

The best thing we can sometimes do for a young person is give them somewhere to stop performing — and be honest that this was the point all along.

If you or someone you know needs support

Help is available in Hong Kong at any hour. The government's Mental Health Support Hotline (**1811**) provides round-the-clock support and referral for people of any age. The Samaritans (**2896 0000**) offer 24-hour emotional support in Cantonese, English, Putonghua and other languages. For young people, **Open Up** (openup.hk) provides online support. In an emergency, call **999**.

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With over 25 years of experience across outdoor education, emotional intelligence coaching, and organisational development, he writes about practice, professionalism, and the conditions that help people and teams grow.

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