Why Dutch leave their children in dark forests

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Austerlitz (The Netherlands):

Shortly after 10pm on a summer night, a car came to a stop at the edge of the woods. A door opened to release three children: towheaded boys of 12 and 15, and a 12-year-old girl with dark pigtails and an emoji-covered backpack. Then the driver threw the car into gear and sped away.

They were tiny figures at the foot of the forest, miles from the summer camp they were attending, with only a primitive GPS to indicate the right direction. Darkness was falling. And they were alone.

They peered into the night: Was this the path? “Could be,” said Thomas, the 12-year-old team leader. And then, they plunged into the woods. This is the Dutch scouting tradition known as a “dropping,” in which groups of children, generally preteenagers, are deposited in a forest and expected to find their way back to base. It is meant to be challenging, and they often stagger in at 2 or 3 in the morning.

Adult organisers may even blindfold the children on their way to the dropping, or drive in loop-de-loops to confuse them. Sometimes, they hide in the underbrush and make noises like a wild boar.

Droppings distill the principles of independence into extreme form, banking on the idea that even for children who are tired, hungry and disoriented, there is a compensatory thrill to being in charge.

Droppings are such a normal part of Dutch childhood that many there are surprised to be asked about it. The dropping team does carry a cellphone, and the scouting association distributes a long list of guidelines. NYT NEWS SERVICE