

the playful mind newsletter

the developmental importance of play

INTRODUCTION

Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children. Despite the benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for some children. A variety of factors have reduced play, including a hurried lifestyle, changes in family structure, and increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of free child-centered play.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and empathy, and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges.

Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue. Ideally, much of play involves adults, but when play is controlled by adults, children comply to adult rules and concerns and lose some of the benefits play offers them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership, and group skills.

In contrast to passive entertainment, play builds active, healthy bodies. In fact, it has been suggested that encouraging unstructured play may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children, which is one important strategy in the resolution of the obesity epidemic.

When parents observe their children in play or join with them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their child's vantage point as the child navigates a world perfectly created just to fit his or her needs. The interactions that occur through play tell children that parents are fully paying attention to them and help to build enduring relationships. Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse into their children's world learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle, nurturing guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing their parents an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of their perspective.

Play is integral to the academic environment. It ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills.

FACTORS CAUSING REDUCED FREE PLAY AND THE POTENTIAL REPERCUSSIONS

Despite the numerous benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for some children. This trend has even affected kindergarten children, who have had free play reduced in their schedules to make room for more academics (reading and arithmetic). This change may have implications on children's ability to store new information, because children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity. A change in academic instruction or class topic does not offer this clear-cut change in cognitive effort and certainly does not offer a physical release. Even a formal structured physical education class may not offer the same benefit as free-play. In addition, many after-school childcare programs prioritize an extension of academics and homework completion over organized play, free play, and physical activity.

Many parents have learned how to become increasingly efficient in balancing work and home schedules. They wish to make the most effective use of limited time with their children and believe that facilitating their children to have every opportunity is the best use of that time. Some may use some of the standards of efficiency and productivity they have mastered at work to judge their own effectiveness as parents; this is sometimes referred to as the professionalization of parenthood. This phenomenon may create guilt in parents who find it difficult to balance competing demands after a taxing workday. Parents who understand that high-interaction, at-home activities (e.g. reading or playing with children) present opportunities for highly effective parenting may feel less stress than those who feel compelled to arrange out-of-home opportunities.

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Some children are given less time for free exploratory play as they are hurried to adapt into adult roles and prepare for their future at earlier ages. Parents are receiving carefully marketed messages that good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel, buy a surplus of enrichment tools, and ensure their children participate in a wide variety of activities. Children are exposed to enrichment videos and computer programs from early infancy as well as specialized books and toys designed to ensure that they are well-rounded and adequately stimulated for excellent development. These tools and programs are heavily marketed, and many parents have grown to believe that they are a requirement of good parenting and a necessity for appropriate development. As a result, much of parent-child time is spent arranging special activities or transporting children between those activities. In addition to time, considerable family financial resources are being invested to ensure that the children have what are marketed as the "very best" opportunities.

The decrease in free play can also be explained by children being passively entertained through television or computer/video games. In sharp contrast to the health benefits of active, creative play and the known developmental benefits of an appropriate level of organized activities, there is ample evidence that this passive entertainment is not protective and, in fact, has some harmful effects.

As parents prepare their children for the future, they cannot know precisely which skills each will need for the workforce. With added anxiety over their inability to adequately predict the future, they become susceptible to the promises of success and full preparation offered by all of the special enrichment programs and vulnerable to the belief that if their children are at least exposed to everything, they will have the best chance to be prepared. Although no one can be sure what skills will be needed, certain character traits will produce children capable of navigating an increasingly complex world as they grow older. These traits include confidence, competence or the ability to master the environment, and a deep-seated connectedness to and caring about others that create the love, safety, and security that children need to thrive. In addition, to be resilient - to remain optimistic and be able to rebound from adversity - young people need the essential character traits of honesty, generosity, decency, tenacity, and compassion. Children are most likely to gain all of these essential traits of resiliency within a home in which parents and children have time to be together and to look to each other for positive support and unconditional love.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD PLAY

Reduce or eliminate screen time

Give your children a chance to flex their own imaginative muscles. They may be bored at first. Be prepared with simple playthings and suggestions for make-believe play to inspire their inner creativity.

Curtail time spent in adult-organized activities

Children need time for self-initiated play. Overscheduled lives leave little time for play.

Choose simple toys

A good toy is 10 percent toy and 90 percent child. The child's imagination is the engine of healthy play. Simple toys and natural materials, like wood, boxes, balls, dolls, sand, and clay invite children to create their own scenes and then knock them down and start over. Avoid passive toys that require limited imagination.

Encourage outdoor adventures

Reserve time every day for outdoor play where children can run, climb, find secret hiding places, and dream up dramas. Natural materials - sticks, mud, water, rocks - are the raw materials of play.

Bring back the art of real work

Believe it or not, adult activity - cooking, raking, cleaning, washing the car - actually inspires children to play. Children like to help for short periods and then engage in their own play.

REFERENCES

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