

the playful mind newsletter

the developmental importance of play

DEVELOPMENT EXPERTS SAY CHILDREN SUFFER DUE TO LACK OF UNSTRUCTURED FUN

Children don't really play much anymore. That's the somber assessment of a growing number of child development experts who are alarmed by the lack of time and interest devoted to unstructured child's play in modern culture.

"It's such a tragedy," said Jane Healy, a Colorado-based psychologist, educator and author of 'Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It.'

"Adults have really lost touch with the basic needs of the child. It's parenting as product development. Everything about children's lives these days seems to be so serious, and play looks like it's not valuable enough. But most of the very highly creative and successful people in the long run are adults who can still adopt a playful attitude toward ideas. I just don't think parents - or even policy-makers - understand that children's spontaneous, self-generated play has tremendous potential to actually enhance brain development and increase kids' intelligence and academic ability."

Healy and others cite numerous examples of unstructured play - initiated by children and powered by their creativity - being curtailed:

Instead of pumping their legs to send a swing soaring toward the sky, millions of children spend afternoons sitting passively in front of a screen watching TV or playing a video or computer game created by someone else. Instead of using their imaginations to build something from a set of wooden blocks, children are pushing buttons to activate an electronic toy programmed by an adult. Instead of kicking around a ball just for fun, young children - some only 2 years old - are signed up for weekly lessons in soccer, tennis and other sports.

Studies by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Centre highlight this trend. Since the late 1970s, children have lost 12 hours per week in free time, including a 25 percent drop in play and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities. Meanwhile, time in structured sports has doubled.

In addition, the amount of homework increased dramatically between 1981 and 1997. For example, the amount given to 6- to 8-year-olds tripled during that time, according to the Centre.

"Part of the response has been, 'OK, let's devote all this time in the early years to learning,' " said Alan Simpson, spokesman for the National Association for the Education of Young Children. "But that's an oversimplification. For young children particularly, play is a crucial part of how they learn."

Unstructured play - especially unstructured physical play - is just as important for older children, but it's disappearing from their lives, too.

Many children attend childcare centres after school. While the best centres offer opportunities for spontaneous play, others force children into structured activities designed to keep them busy and quiet.

Even children who go home after school aren't necessarily using their time in creative play - many end up sitting in front of a computer, television or video game, or listening to music.

Other children have fully booked schedules of organized activities, including sports, choir practice or dance lessons. These activities can be a wonderful way to learn a new skill and make new friends.

The increased emphasis on academics over play has reached even toddlers. "I think many families are much too focused on trying to teach children concrete memory-based things, like their letters or numbers," said Stanley Greenspan, child development expert and author of 'Playground Politics' and 'The Secure Child.'

"Those things are important, but memorizing doesn't teach you to think. Play - what we call 'floor time,' which is getting on the floor and being imaginative with your children - that is what teaches your child to be creative. It teaches them to think."

(Extracted from an article by Karen MacPherson, Post-Gazette Staff Writer, 1 October 2002)