

# the playful mind newsletter

## the developmental importance of play

### CHILDREN NEED PLAYTIME OR ELSE, EXPERTS WARN

### SEDENTARY YOUTH FACE MENTAL HEALTH 'EXPLOSION'

All is not well in the playgrounds of the world, says an international group of child therapists, including several prominent Canadians.

In a letter published in Britain's Daily Telegraph, 270 professionals blame "the marked deterioration in children's mental health" on an overprotective society focused on "stranger danger" and too much "sedentary entertainment."

It cites a recent UNICEF report that found British children are among the unhappiest in the developed world.

In particular, outdoor, unstructured, and loosely supervised play is missing in children's lives, resulting in "an explosion in children's clinically diagnosable mental health problems," reads the letter.

Whether it's time spent playing video games and with "over-elaborate commercialized toys" or whether it's parents' anxiety about the possible threat of strangers, children are getting few opportunities to engage in creative, interactive play, says the letter, which was published on Sunday.

"We have to trust children to play," said Bertrand Dupuis, an educator at the Montreal Children's Hospital who signed the letter. "You know, very small children are quite happy playing with an empty cardboard box. These days, we seem to isolate our children from each other, and they aren't given the opportunities they need to play together, to grow as people."

The effects can range from a lack of empathy to fear of the outside world, the experts say.

"One line of reasoning suggests that, unless we engage in symbolic, dramatic play, we don't develop a good sense of empathy with others," said signatory Henderikus Stam, a psychology professor at the University of Calgary.

And when children see so much real and simulated death in violent video games and TV, "it erodes (their) sense of security," Mr. Dupuis said.

"I believe we're seeing more children who aren't sleeping well, who are more stressed -- sometimes because their own parents are facing more stress. That's leading to more of them visiting doctors and psychologists -- but also it's because their parents are so insecure about their ability to parent well, they just want a professional to tell them there's nothing wrong with their child."

Saskatoon mother Karen Farmer says she tries hard not to meddle in her six-year-old daughter's playtime, which includes imaginative games of make-believe with her friends.

"No adult is going to come up with that stuff," said Ms. Farmer, adding she understands the impulse of well-meaning parents to be "hyper-vigilant" and to over-program their children's lives.

A similar letter appeared in the Daily Telegraph one year ago, signed by British professionals and academics. This year's signatories include professionals from Canada, the U.S., Australia and India. They say what's needed is a "wide-ranging and informed public dialogue about the intrinsic nature and value of play in children's healthy development, and how we might ensure its place at the heart of twenty-first-century childhood."

(Extracted from an article by Larissa Liepins, The Ottawa Citizen, 11 September 2007)

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### LET OUR CHILDREN PLAY

Since last September, when a group of professionals, academics and writers wrote to The Daily Telegraph expressing concern about the marked deterioration in children's mental health, research evidence supporting this case has continued to mount.

Compelling examples have included UNICEF's alarming finding that Britain's children are amongst the unhappiest in the developed world, and the children's charity NCH's report of an explosion in children's clinically diagnosable mental health problems.

We believe that a key factor in this disturbing trend is the marked decline over the last 15 years in children's play. Play particularly outdoor, unstructured, loosely supervised play appears to be vital to children's all-round health and well-being.

It develops their physical coordination and control; provides opportunities for the first-hand experiences that underpin their understanding of and engagement with the world; facilitates social development (making and keeping friends, dealing with problems, working collaboratively); and cultivates creativity, imagination and emotional resilience. This includes the growth of self-reliance, independence and personal strategies for dealing with and integrating challenging or traumatic experiences.

Many features of modern life seem to have eroded children's play. They include: increases in traffic that make even residential areas unsafe for children; the ready availability of sedentary, sometimes addictive screen-based entertainment; the aggressive marketing of over-elaborate, commercialized toys (which seem to inhibit rather than stimulate creative play); parental anxiety about "stranger danger", meaning that children are increasingly kept indoors; a test-driven school and pre-school curriculum in which formal learning has substantially taken the place of free, unstructured play; and a more pervasive cultural anxiety which, when uncontained by the policy-making process, routinely contaminates the space needed for authentic play to flourish.

A year on, the signatories of the original letter to the Telegraph are joined by other concerned colleagues in calling for a wide-ranging and informed public dialogue about the intrinsic nature and value of play in children's healthy development, and how we might ensure its place at the heart of twenty-first-century childhood.

(Extracted from The Daily Telegraph Letters, 10 September 2007)