

The Play's The Thing: Today's Children Are Not Getting Enough Of It

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Play is important to healthy brain development. It allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is in fact so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.

Despite the numerous benefits derived from play, time for free play in American society today has been markedly reduced for many children. Our overscheduled and hurry-up lifestyle has combined with marathon hours of unregulated screen time and with diminishing access to safe places out of doors for children to decrease the average child's opportunity for free and unstructured play.

Today's children are not playing so much as working: working at school and at homework, at improving their talents and at competing with their peers, at adapting to the new instructor or coach, and at not missing Mom or Dad. They, like their computers and television screens, are always "on".

Play in childhood and throughout life helps to relieve the tension of living. Play helps to prepare us for the serious, to define and redefine the boundaries between ourselves and others, and to give us a fuller sense of our own personal being.

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 and developing new competencies and confidence while practicing adult roles. Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills.

And perhaps above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood.

But today's children are too busy with other things to enjoy the simple pleasures children used to take for granted. Relaxation no longer signifies quiet or repose. There is little room in today's hurried world for idle contentment, playful creativity, outdoor exploration, and the passionate pursuit of interests.

Children who are not allowed to retreat once in a while into themselves are not allowed to discover what is there. Making children into achieving doers instead of capable thinkers has its consequences. Children's innate curiosity is intense. When that natural curiosity has no room to fulfill itself, it burns out like a smothered flame.

Compelled towards incessant action, busyness has supplanted togetherness in many families. Being, for children, is doing, adjusting, coping. Parenting, for us, is providing them with things to do. Many of today's parents are simply racing against an imaginary clock in their efforts to plan, schedule, and chauffeur their children to and from a wide variety of organized activities intended to enrich their children's lives but instead often exhausting them.

The very idea that childhood is a race, and that the child's participation in beneficial experiences is more important than playing or being with family are modern ones. Yet there are not indications that children today are happier, more self-confident, less aggressive, or in better mental health than they were sixty years ago. For some children, this hurried lifestyle is a source of stress and anxiety, and may even contribute to depression.

That downtime and time spent sharing in child-directed play has become precious and rare in our highly-packed lives is also unfortunate given that it offers parents a wonderful opportunity to engage fully with their children and to see the world from their child's vantage point. Parents who allot themselves time to glimpse into their children's world learn to communicate more effectively with them and gain fuller understanding of their personalities, thereby building a more enduring relationships with them.

Although parents should certainly monitor play for safety, a large proportion of play should be child-driven rather than adult-directed. While ideally much of play involves adult caregivers, when play is controlled by adults, children acquiesce to adult rules and lose some of the benefits play offers them. 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.

In contrast to passive screen entertainment, play builds healthy, fit young bodies. Encouraging more unstructured play, especially out of doors, is an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children.

At school, reduced time for unstructured physical activity is shown to have implications on children's readiness and ability to learn and problem-solve in the classroom. Young children, especially young boys, allowed minimal or no recess perform less well on testing and exhibit greater behavioral problems. Some children, recess-deprived, are even misdiagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Some of the best learning experiences happen not in an institution, but in a child's independent "research" of the world at hand. As the child interprets the world around her, creates new things with the materials available to her, and extracts new ideas from the recesses of her mind, she is learning to be an active, contributing participant of the world.

Conversely, if she is constantly stuffed with edifying "opportunities for enrichment", resentment and lack of autonomy are the possible results. One needs time to be a thinker, freedom to be creative, and some level of choice to be enthusiastic.

But it would be wrong to assume that the current trends are a problem for all children: some excel with a highly driven schedule. And it is clear that organized activities can have a healthy developmental benefit for children. But what is less clear is at what point a young person may be "overscheduled" to their developmental detriment or emotional distress.

The challenge for society, schools, and parents is to strike the balance that allows all children to reach their potential without pushing them beyond their personal comfort limits, and while allowing them to profit from some free unscheduled time for creative growth, self-reflection, and decompression. Put simply, we must not forget to let kids be kids.