

Time for Play, Every Day: It's Fun—and Fundamental

Child's play is more than just fun and games. It is closely linked to children's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical progress. Decades of research clearly demonstrate that active childhood play—especially the social, “let's pretend” play children do with others—boosts healthy development across a broad spectrum of critical areas. The benefits are so impressive that every day of childhood should be a day for play.

But play is at serious risk today. Many children lack the time, space, and encouragement at home and school to create their own child-powered fun. Video games and other electronic toys threaten to undermine the whole process of play, with grim implications for the intellectual and emotional health of children.

Several trends in education and family life are combining to rob childhood of healthy, creative play:

- Pressures on 3-to-6-year-olds to sit still for academic lessons and standardized testing.
- Too many sedentary hours—often alone—spent looking at screens: televisions, computers, and video games, with their prepackaged scripts that stunt imagination.
- Loss of school recess and safe green spaces for children to freely explore nature.
- Rushed and overscheduled lives, full of adult-organized or adult-oriented activities.
- A glut of toys that take control of play away from children and channel them into violent behavior modeled on popular TV, movie, and video game characters.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Child-initiated play lays the foundations of learning. Through play, children learn to interact with others, to recognize and solve problems, and to feel the sense of mastery that results. In short, play helps children make sense of and find their own place in the physical and social world.

* **Physical development:** The rough and tumble of active play, outdoors as much as possible, is a natural preventive for the current epidemic of childhood obesity. Such play also spurs and helps to coordinate children's sensorimotor development.[1]

* **Academics:** A host of studies demonstrate the close link between play—especially social make-believe play—and cognitive growth. Play is tied to creativity, imagination, and out-of-the-box problem-solving skills. It also helps lay the groundwork for later academic success in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Play provides language-rich, hands-on experiences with the real-life physics—earth, water, wind, and gravity—that help children later comprehend the scientific and mathematical expressions of these physical realities. Research also suggests that recess boosts schoolchildren's academic performance.[2]

* **Social and emotional learning:** Research suggests that social make-believe play is related to increases in collaboration, cooperation, empathy, and impulse control, reduced aggression, and better overall emotional and social adjustment.[3]

* **Sheer joy:** The evidence is clear—healthy children of all ages love to play. Experts in child development say that plenty of time for childhood play is one of the key factors leading to happiness in adulthood.[4]

TIPS TO REVIVE PLAY

1. **Reduce or eliminate screen time:** Children may be bored or anxious at first, unsure how to entertain themselves. Be prepared with simple playthings, good storybooks, and suggestions for make-believe play to inspire their inner creativity.

2. **Choose simple toys:** The child's imagination is the engine of healthy play. Simple toys and natural materials, like wood, boxes, balls, sand and shovels, beeswax, clay, stuffed animals, and generic dolls invite chil-

dren to create their own scenes—and then knock them down and start over. Battery-driven gadgets distract them from real play.

3. Encourage outdoor adventures: Sticks, mud, water, rocks, wind—even bugs and weeds—make a paradise for play. Reserve time every day, when possible, for outdoor play where children can run, climb, find seething places, and dream up dramas. If safety is a concern, organize with other parents to take turns monitoring urban playgrounds or streetside play, or to help clean up and maintain local open spaces.

4. Let your work inspire play: When adults are deeply engaged in work—like cooking, raking, cleaning, or washing the car—their example inspires children to deeply immerse themselves in their play. Children like to help for short periods and then go off and play. Avoid interrupting or taking over play, but be available as needed. Let children know their play is important.

5. Become an advocate for pro-play policies: Share the evidence about the importance of imaginative play in preschool and kindergarten, and of recess for older children with other parents, teachers, and school officials. Lobby for safe, well-maintained parks in your community. Start an annual local Play Day. (For how-to tips, see www.ipausa.org.)

What's the smartest thing a young child can do with a computer or TV?

Play with the box it came in! Computers tend to insist on being just a computer, programmed by adults. But an empty box becomes a cave, a canoe, a cabin, a candy shop—whatever and whenever the child's magic wand of imagination decrees.

The Alliance for Childhood is a partnership of educators, health professionals, parents, and other advocates for children working to foster a broad public commitment to each child's right to a healthy and developmentally sound childhood. This fact sheet is the first in a series the Alliance is publishing on the healthy essentials of childhood. (For more information contact the Alliance for Childhood: P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD20741, Tel: 301-779-1033)

OTHER RESOURCES:

International Association for the Child's Right to Play (Play Day kits): 516-463-5176; www.ipausa.org
Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (Annual Toy Guide): 617-879-2167;
www.truceteachers.org

The Lion and Lamb Project (Nonviolent play ideas): 301-654-3091 or 301-537-8193; www.lionlamb.org
TV Turnoff Network (Take Action page for limiting TV time): 202-333-9220; www.tvturnoff.org

Playing for Keeps (Play ideas and resources for parents and educators): 877-755-5347; www.playingforkeeps.org

NOTES:

1. Anthony D. Pellegrini and P.K. Smith, "Physical Activity Play: The Nature and Function of a Neglected Aspect of Play," *Child Development* (vol. 69, no. 3), June 1998, pp. 577-598.

2. Doris Bergen, "The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development," *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 4(1), Spring, 2002; Jerome L. Singer, "Cognitive and Affective Implications of Imaginative Play in Childhood," in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: A Comprehensive Textbook*, Melvin Lewis, ed., 2002, pp. 252-263; Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman, "What We Know About Play," *Child Care Information Exchange*, Richmond, WA, September, 2002; Edgar Klugman and Sara Smilansky, *Children's Play and Learning: Perspectives and Policy Implications*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1990; Pellegrini and Smith, *op. cit.*

3. Robert J. Coplan and K.H. Rubin, "Social Play," *Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond*, Garland Press, 1998; Klugman and Smilansky, *op. cit.*; Singer, *op. cit.*

4. Edward Hallowell, *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, New York: Ballantine, 2002.

CHILDREN FROM BIRTH TO FIVE

A Statement of First Principles on Early Education for Educators and Policymakers

Academic training is increasingly replacing imaginative play and experiential hands-on learning in the early years of our children's lives. Education is now seen as a race, and the earlier you start, the sooner and the better you finish. Yet there is no evidence that this push for early academics, such as the effort to have children start reading by age five, produces any lasting advantage for children. If anything, research and experience point in the opposite direction.

The current emphasis on teaching reading through formal instruction to five-year-olds is not working, leading many concerned parents and policy makers to assume that reading instruction must start sooner -- at three or four. But that assumption is based on a narrow and thus flawed approach to child development, early education, and the development of literacy.

The key to developing literacy -- and all other skills -- is to pace the learning so that it is consistent with the child's development, enabling him or her to succeed at the early stages. Ensure this initial success and the child's natural love of learning blooms. Doom him to failure in the beginning by making inappropriate demands and he may well be unable to overcome the resulting sense of inadequacy. This is especially true of children whose families are already under social and economic stress.

A HEALTHY START TO A LIFETIME OF LIVING

Recent research confirms that early cognitive development is inextricably linked with physical, emotional, and social development. All grow out of early relationships with family and care-givers. Relationships with parents are of primary importance.

Essential capacities of childhood that must be fostered and developed during the first five years are listed below. These can be used as indicators of kindergarten readiness, but only when combined with appropriate expectations of a five-year-old's development so that children are not handicapped by unrealistic demands. Five-year-olds entering kindergarten generally can:

- * Use ideas and words meaningfully and creatively to make themselves understood and to understand others. This requires an environment that is rich in face-to-face verbal exchanges, including conversation, nursery rhymes, storytelling, and the sharing of books aloud. Orality is a precursor to literacy.
- * Form close relationships with adults and other children. From these come the beginnings of empathy and human understanding.
- * Read and respond appropriately to emotional and social cues and be able to work in groups.
- * Engage in imaginative play, alone and with others.
- * Express creativity through a range of activities, including visual arts, music, dance, etc.
- * Feel at home exploring and caring about the world of nature.
- * Interact with the world through hands-on experiences, handcrafts, and other physically engaging activities.
- * Quiet themselves for short times in order to digest experiences or engage in focused activity.
- * Perceive patterns, follow simple directions, and solve simple problems.
- * Learn to attend to, focus on, and process experiences in an integrated way through motor, sensory, and affective pathways.

GUIDELINES FOR POLICYMAKING

How should the recognition of these capacities be translated into policy? As the Institute of Medicine's report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, states, "The policy issue is therefore not one of getting children ready to learn, but rather one of appreciating that they are born to learn and crafting policies and programs that actively build on their considerable capabilities" (p. 148). Children love to learn. This love needs to be fostered at home and in early care and education programs. Policy can support this in a number of ways:

* Provide funding opportunities for parents to educate themselves about the needs of young children and their own capacities for parenting. Possible options include courses for adolescents on child development and the care of children; and for parents, pre-birth and parenting classes, parent-child programs, home visits, etc.

* Create a renewed focus on early-childhood teacher training and better compensation to help teachers and child care staff. In training programs, place a new emphasis on understanding the broad range of capacities children need to develop, especially the capacity to play, and help develop the creativity and insight of the teachers themselves.

* Focus assessments of early care programs on whether children's prime needs for close relationships with caring, responsible adults and for developmentally appropriate care are being met. Developmentally appropriate care includes: a daily rhythm of healthy meals, rest, and activities; daily periods of play, both outdoors and indoors, in a safe environment; music and the other arts; hands-on and other physically engaging activities, which literally embody the most effective first lessons for young children in the sciences and mathematics; and a rich variety of face-to-face verbal interactions, including conversation, nursery rhymes, storytelling, and books read aloud with attentive adults.

* Recognize that when families are under great stress for reasons of poverty or illness this has a profound impact on children and their emotional readiness to learn. The social and economic stresses on the family need to be addressed as well as the specific needs of the child in the classroom.

* Fund long-term research to identify: when children are developmentally ready to read and to acquire other academic skills; factors that may interfere with their ability to learn, such as overexposure to electronic media; and the best approaches in early education that will lead to a lifelong love of reading and learning.

It is critical that we improve the quality of early care programs. At the same time we must realize that "even for children who spend hours every day in child care programs, the home environment accounts for the lion's share of the variation of what young children know and are ready to learn when they start kindergarten" (From *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, p. 157). One cannot overestimate the importance of supporting parents and family life.

This statement was prepared by the Alliance for Childhood, a partnership of educators, health care professionals, researchers, and other childhood advocates who are working together to improve the health and well-being of all children. It has been endorsed by the following individuals (organizations included for identification purposes only):

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