



## **Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: The Importance of Play to Children's Learning and Adults' Health and Happiness**

- I. **What has happened to play**, especially non-directed free play, for children?
  - A. Loss of unstructured play and exploration (indoors and out; at home, in early care and education and in K-12 education)
  - B. Increase in organized, adult-directed activities
  - C. Increase in screen time (on average about 53 hours per week for school-age children)
  - D. Spillover of adults' work (in large part because of technology), with blurred lines between work and home for many parents, often leading to a demand for quiet at home. (Screen time then can become an easy babysitter, convenient for parents but, in large doses, not good for children.)
  - E. Emphasis on a narrow idea of "academic" learning at earlier and earlier ages and the notion that play is wasting time
  
- II. **What do we mean by play?**
  - A. Trying on adult roles & acting out fantasies through creative play
  - C. Exploring, following your own curiosity, discovering things
  - D. Getting active, sweaty, dirty, wet -- getting silly!
  - E. Also structured or semi-structured games that children can play without ongoing adult direction (e.g. dodge ball, capture the flag, Simon says), as well as board games, although *active play* is what's missing most in children's lives
  
- III. **Why does it matter that children are playing less?** What are the benefits of play?
  - A. Free play (creating and sustaining your own activity) fosters **autonomy and initiative**.

*If the children in our family say they are bored, we say, "I can't wait to see how you figure out how to get unbored! You always come up with such good ideas when you put your mind to it."*

B. Free play demands **creativity**, use of imagination

*Beginning in 1955 when TV was becoming more common and the very popular Mickey Mouse Club first aired, toymakers began advertising toys year-round rather than only during the Christmas season. Cultural historian Howard Chudacoff says that triggered a shift from play that focused on improvised activity to a focus on toys. As toys became increasingly realistic and specific, they left less space for children to use their imaginations. Think, for example of a child playing Star Wars with a toy light saber rather than playing pirate with a tree branch as a sword. The more specific the toy, the less imaginative the child's play.*

C. In self-directed free play children build **problem-solving skills** (overcoming challenges, being resilient)

D. When groups of children engage in free play together, they build and strengthen **social skills** (sharing, cooperation, negotiation, conflict resolution)

E. Free play facilitates children's **strong connections** with peers and also with adults who join in without directing the play

*When you play with your child, following his or her lead, it's a great way to strengthen your relationship. Even just watching – really watching – your child play tells you all kinds of things about what he or she is thinking and feeling. With peers, co-creating and negotiating play builds relationships.*

F. Imaginative play is one way children move toward **mastery of their fears and concerns**

*Children often act out scenes of overcoming things they're afraid of, such as natural disasters, bad guy or a life-threatening illness or injury.*

G. Free play promotes **language development**

*Whether acting out grown-up roles or fantasy characters, children generate a lot of speech, practicing clear communication and creative expression. Negotiating roles and rules with peers also is a great way to practice of important language skills, both listening and talking. Recently we found some entertaining examples of the kids in our family using written language in their creative play: 1) a memo Clara left her little brother McKinley, saying, "You got the job, McKinley! You need to meet your lawyer for dinner tonight at 7." 2) a list of rules for a pretend "pioneer weekend," starting with, "Absolutely no technology" and "You must boil all water before drinking."*

H. **Cognitive development** (executive function and self-regulation)

*Executive function involves planning, organizing, thinking things through. And self-regulation, a major part of executive function, includes managing emotions and controlling impulsive behavior (e.g. not punching the child sitting next to you during story-time if he gets in your space). Self-regulation is extremely important to success in school, work and relationships.*

*One reason imaginative play affects self-regulation is that, during such play, children use what is called “private speech,” voicing what they are thinking, planning and doing. The more play is structured and directed by adults, the less children use private speech.*

*A recent study replicating a classic child development study from the 1940s showed that children today have much less self-regulatory ability. In the original 1940 study, 3-yr-olds couldn't stand still for any measurable length of time; 5-year-olds could stand still for about 3 minutes, and 7-year-olds could stand still about as long as the researchers requested. But in the more recent replication, the 5-year-olds were at the level of the 3-year-olds from 60 years ago and the 7-year-olds barely approached the level of the 5-year-olds from 60 years ago. Considering how important self-regulation is for children's learning and development, this should be a wake-up call for us to understand not only the importance of creative play, but other experiences that will help our children develop this critical ingredient.*

IV. **What are the benefits associated with outdoor play**, especially in nature?

- A. **Better physical health**
- B. **Less stress and anxiety**
- C. **Better concentration** and academic performance

*Researchers led by Frances Kuo at the University of Illinois have demonstrated that children, including those with a diagnosis of ADHD, are more focused and perform better on academic tasks after time spent outside in natural environments. Yet, many schools have eliminated or reduced recess and outdoor physical activities. And, for many children, there are few if any opportunities for them to spend time in nature during after-school hours.*

D. **Greater likelihood of being good stewards of the environment**

*Researchers found that adults who are good stewards of the environment report that, when they were young children, they were introduced to the outdoors by a caring adult. We care for what we know and love!*

V. **What about play in the lives of adults?**

- A. Adulthood often is equated with seriousness, with play not being valued, seen as wasting time
- B. Parents, especially, may not have (or may think they don't have) time to play
- C. When adults do play, it often is in competitive sports rather than more creative free play and exploration
- D. And yet, play in adulthood has benefits much like those in childhood
  - 1. Frees up the adult brain for **creativity**, imagination, problem-solving, invention
  - 2. Improves **physical health** and healing through activity and also through laughter, which really is good medicine!
  - 3. Improves **mental health** by reducing stress, stimulating endorphins that enhance mood and sense of well-being
  - 4. Builds and strengthens **positive connections** with children and friends; enhances intimacy with partner

IV. So, **now what?** What can we do to make sure we and our children reap the important benefits of engaging in non-directed play?

- A. Recognize the value of play and **make it a priority**

*Look closely at a calendar of your child's activities for the next few months and ask yourself if it reflects a good balance of structured or directed activities and unstructured, non-directed time. Try putting "free play" on the calendar just as you would other important activities (for yourself, as well as your child). Make sure a good portion of that time is spent outdoors.*

- B. Create spaces, indoors and out, with materials that invite open-ended play

*The outdoors is filled with natural things children can incorporate into their play – tree stumps, bushes, rocks, twigs, leaves, dirt & water, for example. Indoors or out, chairs & a blanket can become a tent, a house, a fort or a castle; scarves, hats and old eyeglasses can dress up a hundred characters; paper, washable markers, tape and age-appropriate scissors can be used in countless ways, for art projects or as signs and decorations as part of dramatic play. You get the idea!*

- C. Have children generate 3 or 4 rules for playing together, writing down what they suggest; then if conflicts arise or someone breaks a rule, engage the children in figuring out how to resolve the problem
- D. If necessary, give children a suggestion to kick-start play, then ease back and let them take it from there
- E. Get down and play with the children sometimes, following their lead rather than directing the play
- F. Create opportunities for multi-age group play, sometimes with adults included, other times just children of varying ages, with adults monitoring as needed
- G. Step out of your serious adult role and engage in play yourself. This will be good for you and also will set an example for your children!

*Erin had some examples from her own playful times with family and friends. Dress up for Halloween – or just for fun any old time. Talk silly with your kids, taking on characters or trying unusual accents. Read the comics in the newspaper with your partner or your kids. Get a group of friends together to draw or paint, never mind how good you are.*

*Think about things you enjoyed as a child and try them again. Some of Marti's childhood favorites include playing jacks, jumping rope (alone or in a group with a big rope), playing charades, having a spontaneous dance party and creating a skit or musical performance with friends. What are your favorites?*