

Development experts say children suffer due to lack of unstructured fun

Tuesday, October 01, 2002

By Karen MacPherson, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

WASHINGTON -- American 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 American 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," she said. "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 working off stress by running around the playground with their friends midway through the school day, millions of children are confined to classrooms by policies that have cut or eliminated recess to expand prep time for standardized tests.

✿ 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.



(Illustrated by Ted Crow, Post-Gazette)

Part Two

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Part Three

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Studies by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center 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 center.

Most child development experts believe that some structured activities, such as dance lessons or sports, can enhance children's development and learning. And many also believe there can be a limited place for television, computers and even electronic toys.

But these same experts are concerned that growing numbers of parents believe unstructured play is just a waste of time, despite decades of research showing that it is a crucial foundation for developing creativity, intellect and emotional and social skills.

"Part of the response [to that research] 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."

Joan Almon, an educator and the national coordinator for the Alliance for Childhood, said she was upset recently by the blank look a class of kindergartners gave her when she asked them to pretend they were someone else.

"So, I told them how I used to pretend I was Wonder Woman and imagined I was flying. And one child said, 'I don't know how to do that.' "

Unstructured play -- especially unstructured physical play -- is just as important for older children, Almon and others say. But it's disappearing from their lives, too.

For one thing, homework has been ramped up for many students as part of the effort to boost standardized test scores.

In addition, many children attend child care centers after school. While the best centers 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. One recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation showed that a typical American student spends more than 30 hours a week 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.

But they also can squeeze out time for unstructured play, experts note. In addition, they say, many parents see these activities as ammunition for college applications and push their children too hard to excel in them.

Playtime also is being diminished during school hours. The increased emphasis on standardized testing has meant the reduction or elimination of recess in an estimated 40 percent of U.S. elementary schools, according to the American Association for the Child's

Right To Play, a 29-year-old group that helps parents lobby for school recess. In some school districts, such as Atlanta, schools are even being built without playgrounds.

Experts say that's the wrong thing to do, both in terms of child development and stemming the epidemic of childhood obesity.

"Children need to be able to take a break, just like adults," said Jon Hull, a policy analyst with the Council of State Governments, a nonprofit organization that has studied the school recess issue in Southern states. "Recess provides kids with an opportunity to talk with friends, play with a ball or just play on their own."

The increased emphasis on academics over play has reached even toddlers. One recent manifestation is the Bush administration's proposal to add more academics and structured learning to the federally funded Head Start program for low-income preschoolers.

The idea is to ensure that "young children enter school ready to learn to read ... thereby preventing many later reading difficulties," Susan Neuman, assistant U.S. Education Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, told Congress earlier this year.

Many education experts adamantly argue that early structured learning can help these youngsters combat their economic and social disadvantages.

But others counter that the Bush proposals leave little room for the kind of unstructured, playful exploration from which children learn best.

"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 'floortime,' 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."

Tomorrow: Creative play vs. imitative play.

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[Back](#)

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