

## What Has Happened to Playtime, and Should We Be Worried About It?

Whatever happened  
to play time?



Should we be  
worried about it?

*By Sandra Whitehead*

Omar Nasef, 5, scoots across a driveway, belly down on a skateboard, while his brother Mohammed, 7, taps a golf club on the ground.

"If you take more than five taps to get to the finish line, you have to start over," Mohammed declares. Omar races over the chalk line that his brother has drawn and declares himself the champion.

It's a scene we all can relate to - children immersed in play in its most authentic form. No TV, computer or video game screens. No walking, talking, battery-operated toys modeled after Disney characters. Just spontaneous, imaginative play - the kind that has always come naturally to kids.

It's also the kind that teachers, child-development experts and other child advocates are convinced is on the decline - and has been for the last 20 years.

Kids just aren't spending as much time on the living room floor playing made-up games with made-up rules; they're not out in the back yard for hours, playing tag or turning a stand of trees into a fort or clubhouse. On any given afternoon, child advocates argue, you're more likely to find children planted in front of a TV, computer, Game Boy or, if they're old enough, scrolling through the text messages on their cell phone.

Observers blame a number of factors - all pretty familiar to parents today:

- **Families have rushed**, chaotic lives; coming and going to school, work and extracurricular activities all day long.
- **Kids are overscheduled**, in sports, music lessons or other after-school programs that keep them occupied, supervised and focused on achievement.

- **The media is omnipresent** in kids' lives. TV, DVDs, computer, video game and cell phone screens can be found in bedrooms, cars, family rooms, dining rooms and kitchens.
- **Parents worry** about their children's personal safety, limiting kids' chances of spontaneously hopping on their bikes and roaming the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, author and child advocate Richard Louv, who contends that today's kids suffer from "a nature deficit," notes that gated, landscaped fields have replaced many natural green spaces and wooded areas that offered previous generations of kids ready-made places to explore.

It's not that kids aren't playing at all anymore. It's that they have less downtime today, and that, when they do play, they're often indoors with toys that are electronic, digital or automated. Because brain research links free, imaginative play with the development of physical, cognitive and social skills, these trends have child advocates increasingly concerned. This year, some have even suggested the problem is reaching a crisis point.

Renowned child-development expert David Elkind, Ph.D., a longtime advocate for an "unhurried" childhood, published his latest book, *The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children*, in January, with an ominous assertion: "Children's play - their inborn disposition for curiosity, imagination and fantasy - is being silenced in the high-tech, commercialized world we have created."

That same month, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report warning of a marked decline in free play and urging pediatricians to help parents, schools and communities make play more of a priority in kids' lives.

In April, at the annual conference of the International Play Association and the Association for the Study of Play, the keynote address targeted the ever-shrinking time - or outright elimination - of recess during the school day.

We all recognize play as a right of childhood. But is imaginative, authentic play going the way of the dinosaur? Does it matter? Child advocates insist that it does, and that children's development is suffering. Parents, they say, need to make a conscious effort to bring free play back into their kids' lives.

### **What's Lost?**

**Child psychologist Paul Donahue, Ph.D., author of *Parenting Without Fear***, lectures nationwide on what kids need for healthy social and emotional development. Citing research by historian Steven Mintz, author of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, Donahue says there has been a 40 percent reduction in free play since the early 1980s.

"I see it when 7-, 8-, and 9-year-olds say they don't have time to play," he says. "I see kids who don't know how to play."

Free play promotes independence, creativity, abstract thinking and resilience in children in ways that high-tech toys and structured activities cannot, he says. Downtime - and the sense of having "nothing to do" - forces kids to think for themselves, a skill that Donahue believes many children are lacking these days.

Indeed, the effects are beginning to show at the college level, where fewer students are interested in science, Elkind says. "Students are less imaginative, have less curiosity and they don't know how to handle time. These qualities are lacking because of the absence of being nurtured by free, unstructured play," he says. "It's through unstructured play that children develop creativity and problem-solving skills, social skills and self-knowledge. Play is not a luxury; it is not a waste of time. It is an opportunity to learn things you wouldn't learn otherwise."

### **To-Do Lists Primed for Achievement**

Today's children are busier than ever. Elkind, whose 1981 classic *The Hurried Child* explored the idea that children were being pushed to achieve too soon, says studies reveal that kids have lost at least 10 to 12 hours of unstructured playtime a week over the past two decades. The time kids spend in organized sports alone has doubled, he notes.

Most harmful, Elkind contends, is the push for early academic achievement through structured learning experiences. "One of the most negative developments is full-day kindergarten. Being at school all day does not equal kids doing better academically."

The national advocacy group Alliance for Childhood agrees. Early learning products and programs, the group states, put the pressure to achieve ahead of a child's need to develop emotionally, socially and intellectually - areas that benefit from free and imaginative play.

In January, the group issued an updated "Call to Action on the Education of Young Children." Acknowledging a nationwide increase in early childhood programs and the push for universal preschool, the alliance warned, "Preschool education must not follow the same path that has led kindergartens toward intense academic instruction with little or no time for child-initiated learning. ... If such practices were effective for 5-year-olds, we would have seen better long-term results by now."

The report is signed by a who's-who of child-development experts, including Harvard University professors Howard Gardner and Kathleen McCartney, pediatricians T. Berry Brazelton and Mel Levine, child psychiatrists Kyle Pruett, Alvin Poussaint and Stanley Greenspan, MacArthur Award-winning educator Deborah Meier and authors Jonathan Kozol and Daniel Goleman.

Susan Linn, Ed.D., a researcher on child-targeted marketing and co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC), says marketers of early learning products are also to blame for the decline in free play, since parents are led to believe their children need to work on academic skills at very young ages. "We have created a society that is preventing children from playing," says Linn, co-author of *Consuming Kids*.

CCFC has filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission against the popular Baby Einstein and Brainy Baby videos, alleging these are marketed as educational tools for infants when there's no scientific evidence that they can actually boost a baby's brain power. Ironically, she says, "research does show that creative play, which is being replaced by such programs, is beneficial."

### **Screen Time, the Play Default**

One of the biggest thieves of children's playtime is the screen, says Linn. "It used to be that we could assume children would find time to play. Now we can't. Unstructured, self-initiated play is not the default anymore; media is the default." When kids have spare time between activities, they fill it by watching TV or playing a computer or video game.

What's wrong with screen time? "All the time children are glued to a screen, they are involved in someone else's agenda," says education professor Diane Levin, author of *Remote Control Childhood*. "No matter how good the content is, a video or video game engages children in a world someone else has created. ... The problem with videos is not the content as much as it is the process of how kids are interacting with the world."

The more children sit in front of screens for entertainment, Levin continues, the less they learn about how to entertain themselves. Even when children play with action figures modeled after film characters, they aren't really engaging in free play, she says. They're simply imitating what they've seen on the screen.

Linn, who is writing a book on the importance of make-believe, agrees. "If you have a generic stuffed bear, you can make it anything you want, but if you have Disney's Winnie-the-Pooh, it is always Winnie-the-Pooh." And through repetitive watching of DVDs about such characters, children have all the lines memorized, she says. "Before home videos, no one saw the same film more than once or twice a year. Now they have no reason to pretend. If they have seen *Peter Pan* 47 times, they will not make the effort to create a new story."

Screen time isn't the only culprit, however. Automated toys, in general, have interfered with imaginative play, Levin says. When children build towers with blocks, they engage in problem solving, she says. If the blocks fall down, they try another approach. They learn that what they do makes things happen. They come to see themselves as problem solvers.

Electronic toys have even made their way into the nursery. Babies may not learn how to comfort themselves with something as innocuous as playing with their toes, Levin says. Instead, the parent pushes a button, lights flash, and the baby is distracted.

This over-dependence on technology with an absence of more creative play results in what Levin calls "problem-solving deficit disorder. Give them Play-Doh and they'll ask, 'What does it do?' Children are expecting their toys to entertain them."

## Is It a Crisis?

When we remember our own childhoods, our most vivid memories probably come from simple things, such as hopping on our bikes, exploring the neighborhood, catching lightning bugs, or playing games where we negotiate the rules as we go. "That's what is lost," as children have fewer opportunities for free play and downtime, Linn says.

But is that a serious problem? Are today's children suffering because of it?

In neurological terms, whether the decline in free play has damaged children's development is not yet known, says Eric Knudsen, Ph.D., a neurobiology professor at Stanford University whose research has shown that the earliest experiences impact the brain's architecture. "We know free play is important for brain development and for learning how to learn. We know children need it, but we don't really know how much they need."

Not everyone agrees that it's time to sound the alarm about too much structure in kids' lives. A study reported last year in the journal *Social Policy Report* concluded that children who participate in organized activities because they like them, find them exciting and are supported by friends and family, are challenged and gain increased self-worth through participation.

Joseph Mahoney, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Yale University, co-authored the report, which also found that organized activities do not dominate young people's free time. He and other researchers surveyed 2,125 youths, ages 5 to 18, nationwide, and found that only 6 percent of adolescents reported spending more than 20 hours a week in organized activities. And, the kids involved in organized activities had better grades, self-esteem and relationships with their parents, and lower instances of substance abuse than those who weren't involved.

Elkind sees no contradiction in Mahoney's results with his own position. "It's comparing apples and pears. Just because kids are not participating in organized activities, that doesn't mean they are engaged in creative play," he says.

"What we do know, is that children play differently today than they used to," says Laura Schulz, an assistant professor of cognitive sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a scientist, Schulz can't conclude that TV, computers and video games are bad for children. But scientists do know that people learn more when faced with uncertainty, and children are prime examples, she says.

"For infants and toddlers, everything is new - the cat, the furniture, scissors. They keep exploring them until they feel they have solved their problems," Schulz says. That's why they're as happy to play with wrapping paper as they are with an automated toy. The goal, in efforts to preserve real play, is to keep that natural curiosity alive.

# A Prescription for Play

By Sandra Whitehead

How do we encourage more free play in our kids' lives? Educators, child-development experts and parents offer this advice:

- **Make time for downtime.** Put it on your schedule if you have to! Lie on the grass with your kids and examine the clouds, play a game of hide-and-seek. Show your children that you, too, value downtime.
- **Resist peer pressure from other parents to overschedule your child** in sports or after-school classes. Limit kids to one or two extracurricular activities a week.
- **Play with your child.** Pull out the blocks, a board game, dolls or toy cars, and get down on the floor to play.
- **Play with your baby.** Make funny faces, sing and dance around the room.
- **Get your kids outside as much as possible.** Take them to a park or playground. Go on nature scavenger hunts in your back yard.
- **Keep infants and toddlers away from computer, video and TV screens** as long as possible.

**In his new book, *Parenting Without Fear*, psychologist Paul Donahue, Ph.D., suggests some basic toys to promote independent thinking and imaginative play in kids, including blocks, action figures, dolls and dress-up clothes; empty boxes, old blankets, a laundry basket and other makeshift household items; music recordings for kids to dance or sing along with; and a ball, jump rope and sidewalk chalk to use in devising their own games.**

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