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Whatever Happened to Unstructured Play?

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What is unstructured play?

Unstructured play is simply self-initiated and self-directed play without rules, organization, or goals. Unstructured play taps into the imagination, promotes creativity, fosters problem solving, and is stress free. According to an article published in 2005 in the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, free playtime dropped 25% between 1981 and 1997. Music and dance lessons, sports, and TV replaced this free time. Today, new computers and electronic games have children assuming the roles of fictitious characters (not of their own imagination) to play games (by someone else's rules) in order to reach different levels of competency (established by someone else's goals). Whatever happened to playing outside (or indoors) with friends and/or siblings pretending to be someone with super powers, building a fort with sticks and rocks, parenting dolls and playing house, and policing the neighborhood to protect our citizens from evildoers?

Many parents today sacrifice their child's free playtime in exchange for their participation in more structured activities: dance squad, sports teams, music lessons, trying out and making the orchestra, and any other type of "lessons" you can think of. *Most importantly, there is the desire to keep children safe and secure* from the outside world and its troubles – which understandably leads parents to exert more control over their children's activities. Children now participate in more adult-moderated and supervised activities in classes that promote and promise safety and protection, personal enrichment, and predictability.

Are children losing out by not really playing?

Research says yes. Playing really is serious business. Some parents tend to see playing as a waste of time, but it's actually anything but. When children are playing, they are developing all sorts of real life skills: problem solving, sequencing, organization, social skills, compromise, empathy, sympathy, and the list goes on.

Play...



- **Miniaturizes a child's world so they can analyze and deal with it.** Play primes children for learning. Children create and play games with rules (their rules), strategy, levels of success and failure, consequences, all which prepare them for entering society and its social institutions where they'll live and work the rest of their lives.

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- **Teaches them how to handle stress and conflict.** Consider the spats and arguments kids get into when they're playing with friends. More often than not, children will resolve or at least smooth over their disagreements before a game grinds to a halt. If they never have the opportunity to learn how to and practice the art of compromise, they will never enjoy the pleasures of friendly competition or working as a team – even as adults. That's not good for anyone.



- **Provides plenty of problem-solving practice.** When watching children play, you will see them solving problems the way they see them being solved by adults and others around them. This is a reminder to parents that our children always see, hear, study, and execute what they see us do.



- **Promotes discovery which is the basis for learning.** You can explain a concept to children all day and they won't understand it; but, when they discover something themselves, that's when the light bulb really comes on.



- **Gives children a sense of power in a world in which they are essentially powerless.** This is why kids love pretending to be someone with a sense of great power. They are often helpless in the real-world of "powerful" people like parents, older siblings, teachers, and other authority figures. Much of children's fiction relates to this theme (think about Dorothy and her friends standing before the great Wizard of Oz).



What can parents do to give children more time for free play?



- **Change your mindset.** Playing is a child's job. Every minute of their day does not require structure.



- **Let children drop extra activities in which they no longer show an interest.** When pouting occurs at the very mention of a scheduled activity, it is time to rethink the activity's purpose.



- **Let your child be bored!** Boredom produces very creative play!



- **Offer open-ended toys** such as blocks, dolls, old clothes, costumes, and balls that encourage imaginative play.



- **Set TV and computer game time limits.** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends one hour of screen time per day for children ages 2 to 12, and two hours for children over 12.

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- **Encourage free time as often as possible.** Depending on your child's age and temperament, successful free play could be in 15-minute increments. As children get older, they'll be able to entertain themselves for longer periods of time.



- **Gather the neighbors** to see what you all can do to make the neighborhood a safer place for playing outside, specifically slowing the speed and flow of traffic. Ask for help from city officials.



- **Take turns watching each other's children indoors and outside.** Better yet, gather parents and children regularly at someone's home or at the local park for a play date.

Self-directed or unstructured play bridges the gap between imagination and creativity. So while we think we are equipping our children with excellent multi-tasking skills and exposure to the fine arts with structured activities, we may be inadvertently robbing them of the creative and inspired realities of childhood.



Resources:

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