

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says free and unstructured play is healthy and essential

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

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CLINICAL REPORT

Guidance for the Clinician in Rendering Pediatric Care.

The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds

ABSTRACT. Play is essential to development as it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children. Despite the benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for some children. This report addresses a variety of factors that have reduced play, including a hurried lifestyle, changes in family structure, and increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of recess or free child-centered play. This report offers guidelines on how pediatricians can advocate for children by helping families, school systems, and communities consider how best to ensure play is protected as they seek the balance in children's lives to create the optimal developmental milieu.

INTRODUCTION

Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.¹ This birthright is challenged by forces including child labor and exploitation practices, war and neighborhood violence, and the limited resources available to children living in poverty. However, even those children fortunate enough to have abundant available resources and who live in relative peace may not be receiving the full benefits of play. Many of these children are being raised in an increasingly hurried and pressured style that may limit the protective benefits they would gain from child-driven play. Because every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their unique potential, child advocates must consider all factors that interfere with optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play.

No single set of guidelines could do justice to the many factors that impact on children's play, even if it was to focus only on children living in the United States. These guidelines will focus on how American children with adequate resources may be limited from enjoying the full developmental assets associated with play because of a family's hurried lifestyle as well as an increased focus on the fundamentals of academic preparation in lieu of a broader view of education. Those forces that prevent children in poverty and the working class from benefiting fully from play deserve full, even urgent, attention, and will be addressed in a future document. Those issues that impact on play for children with limited resources will be mentioned briefly here to reinforce that play contributes to optimal child development for all children and that we must advocate for the changes specific to the need of each child's social and environmental

context that would enhance the opportunities for play. These guidelines are written in response to the multiple forces challenging play.

The overriding premise is that play (or some available free time in the case of older children and adolescents) is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth. Although the guidelines are written in defense of play, they should not be interpreted as being against other forces that compete for children's time. Academic enrichment opportunities are vital for some children's ability to progress academically, and participation in organized activities is known to promote healthy youth development. It is essential that a wide variety of programming remains available to meet the needs of both children and families. Rather, these guidelines call for an inclusion of play as we seek the balance in children's lives that will create the optimal developmental milieu to prepare our children to be academically, socially, and emotionally equipped to lead us into the future.

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