

INSIGHTS

Is play time dead?



For anyone driving around their neighbourhoods after school or during the holidays, it might seem as though playtime has vanished from our children's lives. Many parents and grandparents nostalgically recall games of cricket on the street with all the neighbourhood kids or fighting for space on the monkey bars on the local playground. But now the playgrounds regularly stand mostly empty, the streets devoid of children. We have clearly moved past the golden age of outdoor play of the 1960s. But is play time dead?

Maybe not.

Data shows that many parents no longer feel comfortable letting their kids play outside unsupervised, but this doesn't mean that children aren't playing at all. It's just that play has undergone a shift.

Humans are naturally drawn to play. It's a vital part of our human experience. Play time begins at birth when babies play with their hands and feet and discover how their bodies work. From there they move through solitary play at 2 years, and then begin playing with other children at around 4 years old. Much play in the early years is not about bonding. In fact, it often occurs with limited interaction – and it's known as parallel play. As children grow older, play may look less like a game of superheroes, and more like playing board games or video games. It may look like trying out new tricks on a skateboard, strumming a guitar, or experimenting with new painting techniques. Even as adults, we may say that we're "playing around with the data", or "toying with an idea". Play is simply defined as any activity that is intrinsically motivated and done for enjoyment. Many things fall under the umbrella of play.

So maybe play time isn't dead. But the kinds of play that we associate with childhood are in decline.

While it is hard to quantify how much play has declined over the last few decades, 85% of mothers agree with the statement that their children play outside less than they themselves did as children. And in the 15 years leading up to 1997, the time children spent playing decreased by 25%. While we don't know how much it has decreased since then, we do know that opportunities for play are shrinking.

Many kids go to school for 6 hours a day, then spend their afternoons and evenings bouncing around various highly structured (and often expensive) extra-curricular activities. While we may enrol our children in these activities with the best of intentions, they are being told what to do and how to do it for large parts of each and every day. They're missing out on engaging in *intrinsically motivated* activities that are done *just for enjoyment*. Even if they enjoy these activities, competition and excellence often supplant connection and mastery as the reason for the activity.

Why does this matter?

Over the same period that opportunities for free play have declined, we've seen a corresponding increase in childhood and adolescent psychopathology. Children today are more anxious, more depressed, and more narcissistic than they were 50 years ago.

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While we can't say conclusively that decreased play has caused this increase in mental health challenges in our children, we do know that play time encourages children to develop their interests, practice making decisions and solving problems, learn to regulate their emotions, assess and respond to risk, develop socially, and most importantly, facilitates access to joy. All of which contribute to good mental health and wellbeing.

So how can we encourage our kids to play more? Here are three goals for what you can aim for:

1. Have one moment of roughhousing/physical play each day

Roughhousing not only helps kids to be physically active (and builds strength), it also encourages emotional intelligence, boosts confidence, and teaches boundaries. For pre-schoolers, you might play a game of airplane and fly them around the room. With your school-aged kids, you might engage them in a game of wrestling (make sure you lose spectacularly, your kids will think it's hilarious!). And with your teens you could challenge them to a game of touch rugby. The idea is to get the heart rate up and get them laughing.

2. Allow at least 45 minutes of uninterrupted free play each day

You might have noticed that when your kids enter a new space, they are often quietly exploring at the start, and then arguments start to break out. Ignore your instinct to intervene. If you allow them to argue, just for a bit, you'll notice that they're trying to define the rules for play. Soon enough they'll be happily playing together and will have learnt about cooperation and compromise along the way. To enable these 45 minutes of free play, leave out some open-ended toys for your pre-schooler to find, re-think enrolling your school kid in an afternoon activity to give them more free time in the afternoon so they can ride to a friend's place or the skate park, and encourage your teen to have at least one homework free night a week so they can hang out with *real people*.

3. Spend two hours outside daily

While this may seem like a huge challenge, over 80% of teens and 60% of kids exceed the screen time recommendation of two hours per day. If we could replace that time (or at least some of it) with outdoor time, they will be reaping huge intellectual, social, physical, and emotional benefits. Nature is fuel for the soul, and it provides a platform for relationship building and physical activity.

In closing

While these goals may seem lofty and unattainable, remember that *"If you're trying and failing, you're still getting one step closer to success than if you're doing nothing."* (Jeanette Coron). Any play time is better than none at all.



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