

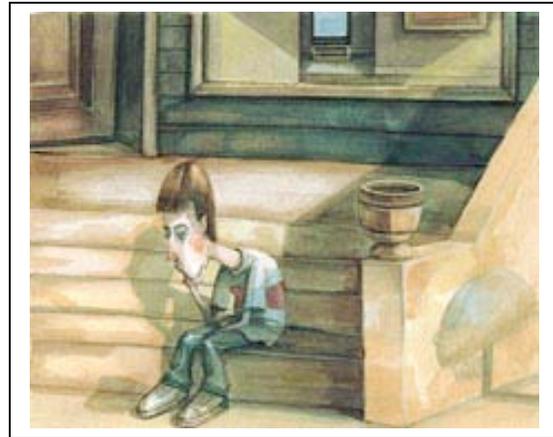
Development experts say children suffer due to lack of unstructured fun

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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.

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."

Creative play makes better problem-solvers

Second of three parts

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By Karen MacPherson, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

WASHINGTON -- Think back to the happiest moments of your childhood. Chances are they were times of carefree play and moments with little to do besides think your own thoughts.

Remember sitting on the grass watching ants scurry about; rounding up friends for a pick-up game of kickball; curling up with a comic book; testing out a new paper airplane design?

To adults, it may seem that these activities weren't particularly important. But child development specialists say they were crucial in cultivating your creativity and imagination, as well as expanding your intellectual, emotional and social skills.

In other words, unstructured child's play -- the kind with no rules, few gizmos and little or no adult direction -- packs a powerful developmental wallop.

Jane Healy, a psychologist, educator and author of "Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds and What We Can Do About It," says too many parents and policy-makers just don't understand the importance of play in children's development.

"Learning the multiplication tables and the alphabet are very important. But those skills need to reside inside a mind that has been expanded by the imaginative and joyous exploration of our environment and the possibility that it offers for fun," Healy says.

Play can be hard to define because it takes many shapes, from physical play to mental play to imaginative play.

But most experts agree that it can be divided into two main categories: child-initiated unstructured play and adult-led play.

Most children do lots of adult-led play. This includes organized sports, physical education classes and extracurricular activities where rules must be followed. Even the most preferred playthings, such as computers, video games and other electronic toys, are generally scripted by adults.

"I feel as if we are creating a culture where we are giving children all the content that we think they need for their imagination, without realizing that in the process we are stifling their imagination," said Joan Almon, an educator who heads the U.S. Alliance for Childhood.

With such a lack of child-initiated play, "we are short-circuiting a lot of their development," Healy adds. "That's because play is the way that children work out their emotional issues, their fears, their anxieties. It's the way they develop a self, a way they develop a sense that they are important people who have ideas to share and who can get along with other people."

There is, obviously, a role for parents, teachers and other adults in most child-initiated play. Adults must ensure children's safety. And they can provide materials or introduce new play opportunities, such as taking a child to a playground or helping a child meet other children.

But many well-meaning parents believe they must be "program directors for their children's intellectual development," Healy says.

Children, of course, have been playing for centuries. It was the 20th-century work of Jean Piaget that underlined the importance of play in children's development. Seymour Papert, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor who created the LOGO computer language, writes that Piaget showed us "children are not empty vessels to be filled with knowledge but active builders of knowledge -- little scientists who are constantly creating and testing their own theories of the world."

Diane Levin, the Wheelock College professor and author of "Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture," gives

an example of Piaget's theory. She describes watching a kindergartner named Tanaka carefully draw lines of various colors to create boxes of different sizes and shapes on pieces of scrap paper.

Inadvertently, Levin said, Tanaka dropped paint into the middle of one box. Dismayed, she stared at the drip for a minute. Then she smiled and began making dot patterns in her other boxes.

Levin notes that Tanaka began her playtime with something she found interesting -- painting. As she painted, Tanaka tried out new colors and different sizes of boxes. Suddenly, she was presented with an unexpected challenge: a paint drip in the middle of a carefully wrought painting. Tanaka had to figure out what to do and gained a sense of "mastery" by solving the problem.

"We might even conjecture," Levin said, "that she would probably not have become as skillful at the tasks and concept she is working on without this rich play process."

Such creative play vividly contrasts with what experts call the "imitative" play of so many children these days. Levin describes watching a 4-year-old boy grab a toy knife and stick it repeatedly into an action figure from a violent children's television show, shouting, "You're dead, you're dead."

"He was using his toys and props in limited and repetitive ways that seem to be determined by how the toys look," Levin said.

She and other child development specialists are disturbed by the dramatic increase in this kind of play in the past 20 years. A main culprit, they argue, is the type of toys children play with.

More and more toys are "licensed," meaning they are based on television shows, movies and sometimes books.

Unlike "open-ended" toys, such as clay and blocks that can be used in numerous ways, media-based toys are generally single-purpose playthings.

"They 'tell' children how to play and can channel them into playing particular themes in particular ways -- merely using the toys to try

to imitate what they see on the TV and movie screen," Levin says. "As a result, their imagination, creativity and ability to find interesting problems to explore and solve -- the very foundation that contributes to children's success in school -- can all be undermined."

Since the deregulation of children's television in 1984, there has been an explosion of licensed toys. At least half of all new toys this year are licensed, and experts predict that the number will continue to increase.

"To the extent children's toy shelves become dominated by these highly structured toys, their play and learning can suffer," Levin argues. "Still worse, because many of the most popular shows linked to toys have violent themes, what children often are channeled into imitating is violence."

Levin and others worry about the long-term consequences of such play. But they also remain optimistic that the situation can be changed.

"While it is unfortunate that in today's world of increased time constraints, parents and teachers need to take a more active and deliberate role in ensuring that children's play meets their needs, in the long run their efforts will pay off," Levin says.

"Children will demonstrate increased levels of independence, resourcefulness and competence as a result of creative play."

Rhonda Clements, a Hofstra University professor and head of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, adds that no one knows exactly what academic or life skills are going to be necessary 20 years down the road.

"But one thing we can bet on is that we will still need people who can solve problems, which is one benefit of play. The people who brought us the technology of today were obviously wonderful players," Clements says.

Experts call unstructured play essential to children's growth

Third of three parts

WASHINGTON -- Parents, do you want to increase your children's academic potential, social skills and creativity? Let them experience boredom.

That's the advice of child development specialists who want to see American children spend more time in unstructured play and less time in structured activities or zoned out in front of an electronic screen.

Giving your children a break from organized activities and electronic baby-sitters could very well mean sentencing them to boredom, at least at first.

But experts say that when deprived of anything else to do, children will find a way to amuse themselves -- even if it means simply daydreaming.

And that's exactly the point: letting children use their own creativity to fill some of their time. In the process, they will be giving a workout to their mental, emotional and social skills.

"Parents worry about kids' boredom, so they schedule their lives to keep them busy," says Alvin Rosenfeld, a child psychiatrist who is co-author, with Nicole Wise, of "The Over-scheduled Child."

"But empty hours teach children how to create their own happiness."

Richard Louv, senior editor of the Washington, D.C.-based group Connect for Kids, adds that "children need adults in their lives who understand the relationship between boredom and creativity -- and are willing to set the stage so that kids can create the play."

Parents can help children get the most out of unstructured play by ensuring their safety and keeping the electronic screens turned off. Parents also might provide materials (paints, clay, etc.) and even gentle suggestions, if necessary. A good new source of ideas is the book "Family Fun Boredom Busters," edited by Deanna Cook. Other books can easily be found in a local library.

Parents need to remember, however, that their role isn't one of camp director.

"Constructively bored kids eventually turn to a book, or build a fort, or pull out the paints ... and create, or come home sweaty from a game of neighborhood basketball. But kids need the guidance of parents or other adults if their boredom is to be constructive, and lead to creativity," Louv said.

Sharna Olfman, an associate professor of psychology at Point Park College, cautions parents to expect children to be balky at first. There may be increased bickering among siblings and lots of whining.

"It would be easier just to give in and throw a video on," Olfman says. "But it's really so much better to let your child be bored. Amazingly enough, they will eventually think of something to do."

Katrina Kenison, author of "Mitten Strings for God: Reflections for Mothers In a Hurry," notes that most of today's adults learned the benefits of boredom as children.

"Left to our own amusements, we found resources that we didn't know we had. ... These were valuable lessons -- and I fear that our own busy, well-entertained children may not ever have the chance to learn them. Inventiveness and self-reliance are being scheduled right out of them."

Child development experts acknowledge that finding time for unstructured play isn't easy. It's particularly difficult for single parents and for families who live in rough neighborhoods where playing outside isn't an option.

But the benefits of unstructured play are so great that experts urge parents to try to find an hour a week for it. And they offer these tips to make getting started easier:

Limit television.

This is the most important recommendation, most experts say. And they admit that it's probably the most difficult, both for the children

who will pout and for their parents who use TV to give themselves a breather.

Because studies have shown that children watch television an average of 38 hours per week, cutting back can free a good-sized chunk of time for unstructured play. There's another benefit, says James Steyer, a Stanford University law professor and author of "The Other Parent: The Inside Story of the Media's Effect on Our Children."

"If another adult spent five or six hours a day with your kids, regularly exposing them to sex, violence and rampantly commercial values, you would probably forbid that person to have further contact with them," Steyer says. "Yet most of us passively allow the media to expose our kids routinely to these same behaviors ... and do virtually nothing about it."

Limit other "screen" time.

Most children spend hours each day at computers, playing with hand-held game devices or watching videos in the car.

Families can set a daily limit that allows time for your child to be unplugged and left to his or her own devices.

Choose toys carefully.

Increasing unstructured play time doesn't require a big investment in new toys. Some basic art supplies, library books and objects collected from nature (acorns, etc.) can keep kids busy for quite some time.

"A 3-year-old is just as happy with a packing box as with the computer" that came in it," contends Jane Healy, a Colorado-based child development expert and author of "Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It."

Stanley Greenspan, a child psychologist, urges parents to remember one key fact: "The value of a toy is proportional to the degree that it invites imagination and creativity."

Joan Almon, coordinator for the U.S. Alliance for Childhood, tells the story of two girls who were comparing notes about their dolls. One girl had an electronically enhanced doll and boasted: "My doll can say 500 words!" The other girl was holding an old-fashioned cloth doll and countered: "My doll can say anything I want her to say."

dot.gif As much as possible, send your children outside to play.

Playing outside promotes more running around, which helps your child sleep better at night and helps battle the obesity epidemic among America's youngsters.

Experts also advise parents to ensure recess during school time. Like adults, kids need a break from their work. Yet many schools have cut or eliminated recess to increase instructional time and preparation for standardized tests.

"A study done on fourth-graders a few years ago found that if you compare children who have had recess and those who have not had recess at the same time of day, the children who didn't have recess were more fidgety and less on task," said Olga Jarrett, a University of Georgia early childhood education professor who has researched the recess issue.

"I suspect that a lot of what we are seeing in terms of hyperactivity in kids may be related to the inappropriateness of the school day for children's physical needs. When you look at a school day with no have to wonder how an adult would function in the same situation."

Spend time watching your child play.

"This can show children that adults value their play," Levin says.

It's not necessary to join in, although that's possible, too, as long as parents don't try to take over. In fact, one highly successful parenting strategy involves spending time each day with your child doing whatever he or she chooses to do.

During this "special time," the child makes the decisions, controls the flow of the play and assigns all roles. It's unstructured play time for your child, yet you get to participate.

Designating some special time with your child forces parents "to slow down, to alter the rhythm of our daily lives in order to make time for each other," Kenison writes in "Mitten Strings for God."

"Given our other obligations and the length of our to-do lists, it is all too easy to forget the good stuff -- namely, how much we actually like our own kids as people, how much we enjoy their company, and how important it is for us to have fun together."

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