

Taking Playtime Seriously

The Checkup

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By PERRI KLASS, M.D., JAN. 29, 2018



Play is a universal, cross-cultural and necessary attribute of childhood, essential for development and essential for learning. Experts who study it say that play is intrinsic to children's natures, but still needs support and attention from the adults around them.

Children are natural players, right from the beginning. “It’s hard to imagine when an infant or a toddler *isn’t* playing,” said Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, a professor of applied psychology at New York University who [studies play and learning in babies and young children](#). She cited, for example, the joys of mushing food, pulling books off a shelf or making noises rattling a paper bag.

“I don’t like it when scientists think children are playing only when they sit down with some toys,” she said. “Almost all the learning that goes on in the first years of life is in the context of exploration of the environment.”

Dr. Tamis-LeMonda’s research includes going into homes to look at everyday play, with a special focus on how play functions in language learning. “We think that all domains of development are informed by children engaging in play,” she said. This certainly includes communication, with babies learning words and concepts as they engage with objects in their environment (ball, blue), spatial math concepts when they play with blocks (or pull the books off a shelf), getting motor practice as they climb and crawl and run.

And this is all mixed in with the cognitive development which goes along with symbolic play, children re-enacting their own experience by pretending to feed their dolls, or putting the puppy to bed, and with the social development of learning to take turns.

But though play may be intrinsically present, and intrinsically playful, those who study its importance in children’s lives point out that it can also be threatened, either by too little attention and responsiveness from distracted adults or, in another sense, by too much attention and teaching, of the not-so-playful kind.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Temple University, pointed to statistics that suggest that as children age into preschool and kindergarten, we are encroaching more and more on their time for playing.

“What are kids doing instead?” she asked. “The answer is test prep.” In kindergarten classrooms studied in [New York and Los Angeles in 2009](#), she said, teachers reported that there was little or no time to play. [Kindergarten had become the new first grade](#), with much less time for art, or for running and jumping and bouncing, she said, and a quarter of the Los Angeles teachers said there was no time at all for free play.

“We’re trying to train our kids to be better computers, but our kids will never be better computers than computers,” Dr. Hirsh-Pasek said. In addition to teaching children content, we should look to strengthen their human skills, she said, helping them learn to think up new ideas and explore them, and to navigate the social worlds of play and, later, of work. “These are things humans do better than computers, and play helps us develop that.”

So part of encouraging play is pulling back on how much programmed goal-directed learning we expect from very young children, to leave them time for the fun of exploration, curiosity and, well, fun. But another important part may be creating environments that foster children's play and parents' participation and attention.

Dr. Hirsh-Pasek, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, cited its Learning Landscapes Initiative, which aims to set up learning opportunities in public places where people will encounter them. One of these, the [Urban Thinkscape project](#) in Philadelphia, involves puzzle benches at bus stops, with puzzles designed to build STEM skills.

Before the benches were installed, she said, parents waiting for buses were almost uniformly looking at their cellphones. "Now we're starting to see playful learning interactions." They have also tried putting up a big chalkboard with a prompt for people to complete: When I was little, I played

"We put one up in a park," she said. "In four days it was completely filled with responses." And interestingly, the activities people cited from their own childhoods were mostly free recess-type activities with other kids.

As children get older, she said, some of their playing continues to be free play, in which a child goes out into the world as a discoverer and an explorer, and some is "constrained tinkering," which she compared to bowling with bumpers. "People learn best when they're active, when they're engaged rather than distracted, when it's socially interactive, and when it's joyful," she said.

Free play, she said, reduces stress and also "allows our kids to flex their entrepreneurial muscle." But guided play is also important, as children grow, and parents should look for toys and environments (like children's museums) that feed children's curiosity and offer new opportunities for exploration.

What happens when children start playing more with virtual objects, manipulating touch screens instead of blocks and books?

"I'm very concerned that screentime is substituting for active playtime," Dr. Tamis-LeMonda said. Children need to engage with real objects, handling them, building with them, dropping them and throwing them.

And of course, parental screentime can also get in the way of playing together and learning. In a [study](#) published in 2017 by Dr. Hirsh-Pasek and her colleagues, mothers taught their 2-year-olds two novel words. When the interactions were interrupted by a cellphone call, those children did not learn the new word.

Young children will play and young children will learn, and that playing, as well as that learning, deserves to be recognized and supported. What they

most need are interactions, language, give and take, which can just be another way of saying somebody to play with. No special skills or equipment are needed; every parent learns the virtue of pots and spoons as playthings, and boxes that are more fascinating to babies than the toys they contained.

As children get older, we need to keep an eye on whether their schools give them time to play, we need to help them go on engaging with the world around them, and we might even be able to make that world a better environment for learning and play. Again, this is not about walling children off into special places where they can play, it's about helping them play and learn in the world, in the homes and schoolrooms and larger environments in which they live and grow.

“Play is not a specific activity, it's an approach to learning, an engaged, fun, curious way of discovering your world,” Dr. Tamis-LeMonda said.