



AUGUST 23, 2018

A Simple Prescription for Child Well-Being: More Unstructured Play

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Highlights

- “Real learning happens better in person-to-person exchanges rather than machine-to-person exchanges”—the American Academy of Pediatrics in a new report.
 - “Fathers are more likely to be the play partner with children,” Dr. Michael Yogman says, “and rough-and-tumble play with fathers provides a complementary learning experience to mothers.”
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Children today face a number of challenges to engaging in what many of us probably took for granted in our youth: good, old-fashioned, unstructured play—whether running around the playground at school recess, wrestling on the floor with dad, or getting dirty in the backyard with other kids from the neighborhood. These challenges include more emphasis on academics, less free time for working parents and over-scheduled kids, unsafe neighborhoods, and new technologies that constantly entice all of us to sit and stare at screens. That’s why a new clinical report (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/08/16/peds.2018-2058>) from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) advises pediatricians to “write a prescription for play” for young children along with the advice they regularly offer parents on nutrition and developmental milestones.

Importantly, “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/08/16/peds.2018-2058>),” does not include video games or computerized gadgets in its list of recommendations for play. Rather, it notes, “Real learning happens better in person-to-person exchanges rather than machine-to-person exchanges.” It defines play as “activity that is intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery,” and that includes objects (like traditional toys), is rough-and-tumble, takes place indoors and outdoors and with peers and alone, and involves make-believe.

This type of unstructured play, which comes naturally to children, especially when they are deprived of distractions, “is not frivolous,” the AAP emphasizes, but “brain-building.”

The lead author of this AAP clinical report is Michael W. Yogman, M.D. (<http://www.yogmanpediatrics.com/index.php/our-staff/dr-yogman>), Assistant Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School. He told me that the report was motivated by a concern that “our culture has devalued play.” In his five years serving as chair of the Boston Children’s Museum, he observed many parents engaging in “joyful play” with their children. But he also noticed from conversations with parents that families face a lot of barriers to the kind of play that children need to thrive.

“Children and their parents are pressured to engage in lessons and structured activities all the time leaving little time for play,” he said. “Some schools have eliminated recess, art, and music so that kids can be better prepared for tests. And preschools are dispensing with blocks and substituting didactic learning for playful learning.”

Dr. Yogman also pointed to digital media as a barrier to play. “For young children, digital media is often portrayed as educational when, in fact, it is often passive, not interactive and less conducive to learning,” he noted. “Older children substitute virtual interactions via texting for live, in-person interactions with friends.” He added, “This paper tries to restore a balance and points out the value of play.”

The report details a long list of research-based benefits of play, including improved executive functioning (i.e., cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory), early language and math skills, social development, physical and mental health, and personal agency. In particular, play facilitated by parents and adult caregivers may also help children deal with stress

and trauma by helping “build the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress; and build social-emotional resilience.” For example, it cites one year-long study involving disruptive preschoolers that found that spending one-on-one play sessions with a teacher “showed reduced salivary cortisol stress levels during the day and improved behavior compared with children in the control group time with a teacher.” On the other hand, one study suggests that play deprivation may be associated with the “increasing prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.”

Both parents, according to the AAP, have equally important roles to play in helping children develop healthy play behaviors—starting in infancy. “Play facilitates the progression from dependence to independence and from parental regulation to self-regulation. It promotes a sense of agency in the child,” the report states. “This evolution begins in the first 3 months of life when parents (both mothers and fathers) interact reciprocally with their infants by reading their nonverbal cues in a responsive, contingent manner.”

While it is not specifically addressed in this report, we know from a 2016 AAP report on fathers (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/06/10/peds.2016-1128>) that dads have a “unique and irreplaceable (<http://ifstudies.org/blog/the-unique-contributions-of-fathers-to-child-health>)” role in healthy child development, particularly through physical play. Because Dr. Yogman also served as the lead author of that report, I asked him about the special role of fathers in encouraging play.

“Fathers are more likely to be the play partner with children,” he said, “and rough-and-tumble play with fathers provides a complementary learning experience to mothers.”

Most of us probably view wrestling on the floor with a preschooler or tossing a toddler into the air as fun but not necessarily developmentally beneficial. However, it is through a father’s unique style of play, Dr. Yogman explained, that:

kids learn about motor skills and body movement and experience joyful exuberance; they are more comfortable taking safe risks and being more exploratory—testing their boundaries. Guided competition during rough-and-tumble play also helps children learn to negotiate, so that they can win and lose graciously. And it models the development of empathy because they are guided not to inflict harm. Physical play with fathers also encourages an active lifestyle and may have a role in preventing obesity.

The AAP report on the power of play is not only aimed at pediatricians and parents but also educators, who are reminded about the importance of creative play as a part of a child's education experience beginning in preschool:

Instead of focusing solely on academic skills, such as reciting the alphabet, early literacy, using flash cards, engaging with computer toys, and teaching to tests (which has been overemphasized to promote improved test results), cultivating the joy of learning through play is likely to better encourage long-term academic success.

The report concludes by pointing out that although "many parents do not appreciate the importance of free play or guided play with their children and have come to think of worksheets and other highly structured activities as play," there are "playful moments" available everywhere, even in doing simple chores together.

In our fast-paced, digitally-enhanced lives, perhaps we've lost sight of a much simpler tool for success that comes to our children naturally and brings cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that extend beyond the classroom. This timely reminder from pediatricians that one of the most powerful ways to help our children learn and thrive is to simply give them the freedom to play—with us, their peers, and on their own—is certainly one that parents, caregivers, and child educators should heed.

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