

PLAY TIME: KIDS NEED INVALUABLE, OLD-STYLE, FREE-FORM FUN

By Colleen O'Connor • Oct 02, 2010



Four-year-olds Sophia, center, and Kayla dance on the playground at The Goddard School® in Englewood. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

All work and no play makes very dull kids, and a tight schedule of organized activities — soccer, art classes, music lessons — is no help.

Play is now an endangered activity in America.

Over the past two decades, children lost eight hours a week of spontaneous free-form play, while more than 30,000 schools have eliminated recess to make more time for academics, according to David Elkind, Ph.D., author of “The Power of Play” and “The Hurried Child.”

Controversy remains over the effectiveness of free-play as a learning tool in the classroom. A study published in the

current issue of the journal *Child Development* suggests that preschoolers given lots of free-play time with little guidance from teachers did not advance as quickly in math and language skills as kids who had more input from teachers.

But when it comes to free-play outside the classroom, there’s overwhelming consent among experts.

Decades of research has documented how play improves the intellectual, physical and social-emotional development of children, and in 2007 the American Academy of Pediatrics released a study that said unstructured play — such as building forts from cardboard boxes in the backyard, or imagining that you’re a magic dragon swooping over the city — is critical to development of the brain itself.

Last year, the Alliance for Childhood declared the loss of children’s play a public-health issue, recommending that kids get at least 60 minutes of free play each day, preferably outside.

And this weekend, Play for Tomorrow — a consortium of child advocates that includes researchers, educators, authors and business leaders — will launch “The Ultimate Block Party,” an event held in sync in cities throughout the country. Organizers hope it will kick-start a social movement to rescue play from the American scrap bin.

“Children are so overprogrammed,” said Susan Magsamen, co-director of the Neuro-Education Initiative at the John Hopkins University School of Education and who helped create Play for Tomorrow. “As parents, we believe that if we don’t do that, our children are not going to succeed. We think being good parents means signing them up for everything.”

Often, that includes starting academics — testing and homework — in kindergarten, with math and reading education starting in preschool.

“If we keep feeding this culture of paranoia,” said Magsamen, the current “teaching to the test” trend will steamroll the importance of play, “which helps build the skills that children need to be successful.”

Despite parental peer pressure to keep up in the race for smart kids, many adults instinctively know about the power of play.

In a winter 2008 survey published in the *American Journal of Play*, 95 percent of U.S. mothers queried expressed concern that kids are missing out on the joys and experiential learning opportunities of free play.

“I want to raise my daughter the way I was raised,” said Denise of Aurora, who Friday afternoon was out playing in the park with her 1-year-old. “My sister and I played Barbies, and we’d spend hours in the basement building houses for Barbies.”

This world of imaginary play allows kids flexibility to focus on their own passions and interests, and helps them learn how to work in groups while practicing the skills of negotiation, sharing and decision-making.

The lost art of play stems from sweeping social changes, including technology and computer games, more working parents with less time for playgrounds, and intense focus on academic fundamentals promoted by such initiatives as No Child Left Behind and driven by intense competition for acceptance at private preschools.

“It’s a delicate balance,” said Susan Hackett, director of The Goddard School® in Castle Rock, which is participating in “The Ultimate Block Party.” “This is just a reminder to find an extra moment in the day, that bit of downtime just to be a kid.”

Advocates hope that parents can begin to model this change for their kids.

“Like at dinner time, turn on the radio and have a dance party or play charades,” said Magsamen. “There’s lots of opportunities where parents can be more playful.”

This makes a lot of sense to Jessica of Englewood, who pushed her 5-month-old son in a swing at the park.

“If kids don’t use their imaginations, they start taking things too seriously,” she said. “Then they can’t see the humor in life when they get older.”

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