

Alliance for Childhood

The Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. Our public education campaigns bring to light both the promise and the vulnerability of childhood. We act for the sake of the children themselves and for a more just, democratic, and ecologically responsible future. For more information visit our web site: www.allianceforchildhood.org.



Photograph by Dody Riggs

Time for Play, Every Day: It's Fun — and Fundamental

There was a time when children played from morning till night.

They ran, jumped, played dress-up, and created endless stories out of their active imaginations.

Now, many scarcely play this way at all. What happened?

- Over four and a half hours per day watching TV, video game, and computer screens;¹
- Academic pressure and testing, beginning with three-year-olds;
- Overscheduled lives full of adult-organized activities;
- Loss of school recess and safe green space for outdoor play.

Decades of research clearly demonstrate that play—active and full of imagination—is more than just fun and games. It boosts healthy development across a broad spectrum of critical areas: intellectual, social, emotional, and physical. The benefits are so impressive that every day of childhood should be a day for play.

What's the smartest thing a young child can do with a computer or TV? Play with the box it came in! Computers tend to insist on being just computers, programmed by adults. But an empty box becomes a cave, a canoe, a cabin, a candy shop—whatever and whenever the child's magic wand of imagination decrees.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Child-initiated play lays a foundation for learning and academic success. Through play, children learn to interact with others, develop language skills, recognize and solve problems, and discover their human potential. In short, play helps children make sense of and find their place in the world.

- **Physical development:** The rough and tumble of active play facilitates children's sensorimotor development. It is a natural preventive for the current epidemic of childhood obesity. Research suggests that recess also boosts schoolchildren's academic performance.²
- **Academics:** There is a close link between play and healthy cognitive growth. It lays the foundation for later academic success in reading and writing. It provides hands-on experiences with real-life materials that help children develop abstract scientific and mathematical concepts. Play is critical for the development of imagination and creative problem-solving skills.³
- **Social and emotional learning:** Research suggests that social make-believe play is related to increases in cooperation, empathy, and impulse control, reduced aggression, and better overall emotional and social health.⁴
- **Sheer joy:** The evidence is clear—healthy children of all ages love to play. Experts in child development say that plenty of time for childhood play is one of the key factors leading to happiness in adulthood.⁵



Photograph by Larry Canner

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD PLAY

- Reduce or eliminate screen time: Give your children a chance to flex their own imaginative muscles. They may be bored at first. Be prepared with simple playthings and suggestions for make-believe play to inspire their inner creativity.
- Curtail time spent in adult-organized activities: Children need time for self-initiated play. Overscheduled lives leave little time for play.
- Choose simple toys: A good toy is 10 percent toy and 90 percent child. The child's imagination is the engine of healthy play. Simple toys and natural materials, like wood, boxes, balls, dolls, sand, and clay invite children to create their own scenes—and then knock them down and start over.
- Encourage outdoor adventures: Reserve time every day for outdoor play where children can run, climb, find secret hiding places, and dream up dramas. Natural materials—sticks, mud, water, rocks—are the raw materials of play.
- Bring back the art of real work: Believe it or not, adult activity—cooking, raking, cleaning, washing the car—actually inspires children to play. Children like to help for short periods and then engage in their own play.

BECOME AN ADVOCATE FOR PLAY

- Spread the word: Share the evidence about the importance of imaginative play in preschool and kindergarten, and of recess for older children, with parents, teachers, school officials, and policymakers.
- Lobby for safe, well-maintained parks and play areas in your community. If safety is a concern, organize with other parents to monitor play areas.
- Start an annual local Play Day. For tips on how to do this in your neighborhood or town, see www.ipausa.org.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR REVIVING PLAY:

International Association for the Child's Right to Play (Play Day kits): 914-323-5327; www.ipausa.org

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (Annual Toy Guide): 617-879-2167; www.truceteachers.org

TV Turnoff Network (Take Action page for limiting TV time): 202-333-9220; www.tvturnoff.org

Playing for Keeps (Play ideas and resources for parents and educators): 877-755-5347; www.playingforkeeps.org

All Work and No Play: How Educational Reforms are Harming Our Preschoolers, Sharna Olfman, Ph.D., ed.

Children at Play: Using Waldorf Principles to Foster Child Development by Heidi Britz-Crecelius

Earthways: Simple Environmental Activities for Young Children by Carol Petrash

Reclaiming Childhood: Letting Children Be Children in Our Achievement-Oriented Society by William Crain, Ph.D.

The House of Make Believe by Dorothy G. Singer, Ph.D. and Jerome L. Singer, Ph.D.

Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood, by Susan Linn

Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, by Richard Louv

Footnotes

¹ Emory Woodard, "Media in the Home 2000," Annenberg Public Policy Center, U. of Penn., 2000.

² Anthony D. Pellegrini and P.K. Smith, "Physical Activity Play: The Nature and Function of a Neglected Aspect of Play," *Child Development* 69(3), June 1998; Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman, "What We Know About Play," Child Care Information Exchange, Sept. 2002.

³ Doris Bergen, "The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development," *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 4(1), Spring 2002; Jerome L. Singer, "Cognitive and Affective Implications of Imaginative Play in Childhood," in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: A Comprehensive Textbook*, Melvin Lewis, ed., 2002; Oliver and Klugman, op. cit.; Edgar Klugman and Sara Smilansky, *Children's Play and Learning: Perspectives and Policy Implications*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1990; Pellegrini and Smith, op. cit.

⁴ Robert J. Coplan and K.H. Rubin, "Social Play," *Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond*, Garland Press, 1998; Klugman and Smilansky, op.cit.; Singer, op. cit.

⁵ Edward Hallowell, *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*, New York: Ballantine, 2002.



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