

The Importance of Play

The American Academy of Pediatrics just released a report with an important message about children's health. The report details how over-scheduling children's time, both through academic demands and structured extracurricular activities, can create stress, anxiety, and even depression. The report illustrates how healthy free and unstructured play is essential for social, emotional, cognitive and physical development. Many highly scheduled children thrive, but there are many who do not. All children need unstructured time for creative growth, self-reflection, and just decompressing.

Unstructured time is not the same as unsupervised time. While children need to play on their own, undirected even if observed, the report also highlights the positive effects of children and parents playing together in an unstructured way. Such play socializes children and builds a bond between parents and their children. In either case, healthy child development is fostered by child-directed and active play.

The acceleration of scheduled time for children seems to be, in part, related to parents' desire to help their children gain advantages—advantages that will help them attain high academic achievement, get into certain secondary schools and universities, to get ahead in life. These are valuable advantages, but this report suggests there is also advantage in child directed play: developing decision making skills, discovering and developing a passion for life long interests, negotiating differences, discovering one's own pace.

The report reinforces the importance of recess and physical education in school. Schools are also encouraged to be sensitive to the demands made on children outside of school that may diminish opportunities for free play, such as excessive homework. In neighbourhoods that may be less safe for children to play outdoors, schools may play a role in providing safe spaces.

The AAP advocates both organized and free, child-centred activities, in a balance that works for the individual child and family. The report can be found online at <http://www.aap.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf>

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