



The Loss of Children's Play: A Public Health Issue

Children's health—today and in the future—is a critical public health challenge. Physicians tell us that today's children will live shorter lives than their parents, while economists predict that the long-term costs of childhood obesity will be catastrophic.

Reversing the decline in children's health requires a multi-pronged approach. Diet and exercise are already getting increased attention. Another vital but overlooked factor is the loss of free play, especially active outdoor play, initiated and directed by children themselves.

Children used to play for hours each day, burning calories and keeping fit and healthy. At the same time, play helped them socialize with others, develop mental acuity, and reduce stress. With the decline of play, all areas of child development have suffered, but the impact on health and obesity is most alarming.

The decline in children's play is well documented. Compared to the 1970s, children now spend 50% less time in unstructured outdoor activities.¹ Children ages 10 to 16 now spend, on average,

only *12.6 minutes* per day in vigorous physical activity. Yet they spend an average of *10.4 waking hours* each day relatively motionless.² A sedentary lifestyle often goes hand in hand with obesity and other health problems.

Obesity cannot be overcome simply by exhorting children to eat a healthier diet and exercise more. A successful anti-obesity effort must involve more active play, which has rich benefits for both physical and mental health. Luckily, children are naturally motivated to play.

Research findings on play and health:

- Physical activity and free play are essential to maintaining a healthy weight and supporting cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development and well-being. Play enhances self-regulation, empathy, and group management skills. (Stanford School of Medicine, "Building Generation Play," 2007; Hirsh-Pasek et al., *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool*, Oxford University Press, 2009)

- The American Academy of Pediatrics links increases in depression and anxiety to a lack of unstructured playtime. It recommends that children spend at least 60 minutes each day in

RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

What Is Needed to Restore Active Childhood Play?

Time for play: All children need at least 60 minutes of free play each day, preferably outdoors. Recess must be a daily school activity, and should never be withheld as a way to punish a child.

Places to play: Children need safe places to play within an easy walk from their homes. Ideally these should be playgrounds integrated with natural settings. Opening school playgrounds for after-school and weekend play would increase available play space significantly. Creating safe routes to schools and parks would allow children to walk and bike more freely.

Adult support: In many communities children need adult oversight in order to play safely. Staff and volunteers can be trained to support children's play without directing or dominating it. They can assist during recess, as well as before and after school and on weekends and holidays. This can happen not just in schools but also in parks, zoos, museums, recreation centers, and other places where children gather for play and enjoyment.

¹Juster et al. "Major Changes Have Taken Place in How Children and Teens Spend Their Time," 2004

²Strauss et al., "Psychosocial Correlates of Physical Activity in Healthy Children," 2001

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open-ended play. (American Academy of Pediatrics, Ginsburg et al., “The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds,” *Pediatrics*, January 2007)

- Time spent playing outdoors significantly reduces the severity of symptoms of children with attention disorders. (Kuo and Taylor, “A Potential Natural Treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder,” *American Journal of Public Health*, September 2004)
- A randomized controlled study of 129 children, ages 9 to 24 months, exhibiting stunted development found that weekly play sessions had significant long-term benefits (to age 17) for psychosocial functioning, including reduced anxiety and depression and fewer attention problems. (Susan P. Walker et al., “Effects of Psychosocial Stimulation and Dietary Supplementation in Early Childhood on Psychosocial Functioning in Late Adolescence,” *British Medical Journal*, July 2006)
- Opportunity for recess has declined in many schools. Yet children who have more time for recess in school are better behaved and learn more. (Barros, Silver, and Stein, “School Recess and Group Classroom Behavior,” *Pediatrics*, February 2009)
- Children who are poor and black are the most likely to be denied recess. First-graders in high-poverty schools are 5 times as likely to have no recess at all as those in wealthier communities, and first-graders in high-minority schools are 7 times as likely to have no recess as children in mostly white schools. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005)

Parents are deeply concerned about the loss of play and the erosion of childhood. They are prepared to take action.

- In a survey of nearly 1,700 parents 80% agreed that children’s unstructured play is extremely or very important; only one in six said it is only

somewhat or not at all important. In the same survey, less than 4% said that outdoor play was unimportant. (KaBoom!/Harris Interactive survey, 2009)

- An overwhelming majority of Americans—91%—believe that having a break with physical activity helps children stay focused and learn in the classroom. Nearly 4 of 5 parents believe children aren’t getting enough physical playtime. (Playworks and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, “Assessing Recess: Growing Concern about Shrinking Play Time in Schools,” 2008)
- Ninety-five percent of mothers surveyed in the U.S. express deep concern that their children are growing up too quickly and missing out on the joys and experiential learning opportunities of free play and natural exploration. (Singer et al., “Children’s Pastimes and Play in Sixteen Nations: Is Free-Play Declining?” *American Journal of Play*, Winter 2008)
- Eighty-five percent of mothers said TV and computer games were the number one reason for the lack of outdoor play; 82% identified crime and safety concerns as factors that prevent their children from playing outdoors. (Clements, “An Investigation of the Status of Outdoor Play,” *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 2004)
- Urban parents in particular see their own lack of time to take their children to playgrounds and supervise their play as major obstacles. They identify the need for play supervision so that children can play freely. (KaBoom!/Harris Interactive survey, 2009)

Organizations and institutions that are actively involved in supporting children’s free play include: Alliance for Childhood, Arbor Day Foundation, Children and Nature Network, International Play Association, KaBoom!, National Institute for Play, National Wildlife Federation, New York City Parks Department, Sarah Lawrence College Child Development Institute, U.S. Play Coalition, Wild Zones, and YMCA.

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THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD is a nonprofit partnership of educators, health professionals, and other advocates for children who are concerned about the decline in children’s health and well-being.

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