



Department of Family Medicine, Stony Brook University
NYSDOH Healthy Heart Program

Thinking Outside the Sandbox

The Importance of Unstructured Play for Children

Outdoor exploration and free play are among the most passionate and liberating joys of childhood. Giving children the opportunity to engage in open-minded, unstructured activities with minimal rules and boundaries allows them to gain new perspectives and enjoy all that the outside world has to offer.

Child development literature lists countless benefits to allowing children to play freely, and define the term as follows: “playful context combined with a dimension of physical vigor”(Pelligrini and Smith 1998). It is widely accepted that unstructured outdoor activity is an appropriate outlet for children to grow developmentally. Daily physical activity is also a major factor in the prevention of childhood obesity. Developing exercise habits in childhood can help to prevent conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease later in life. It is viewed that unstructured activity in-doors helps children to cultivate their imaginations and their ability to create. The following are a few more reasons why unstructured play and care-free outdoor activity should be a part of every child’s life:

1. Play is an active form of learning and unifies the mind, body and spirit. Until at least 9 years old, a child’s learning occurs best when the whole self is involved.
2. Play reduces the tension that comes with the school day’s requirement to learn and behave in a structured environment. In unstructured play, adults do not interfere in rules or boundaries and thus, the child can relax.
3. Children express and work out emotional aspects and conflicts of everyday life through unstructured play.
4. Children allowed to play freely with peers develop skills for seeing things through another’s point of view by cooperating, sharing and solving problems.
5. Children, who are less restricted in their access to the outdoors, and to resources in the world around them, become more independent and gain confidence that will allow them to move through the larger world. Unstructured play will lay the foundation that will eventually enable them to lead their own lives.

While many parents realize the importance of physical and creative play, the growing demands on parents on the work-front has resulted in a reduction of time spent playing outdoors and in the amount of free time that can be spent on simply “being a kid.” Children are spending much more time than ever before in front of the television, playing computer games and watching videos. Other children have after school activity schedules comparable to that of a high power executive: countless hours of lessons and structured activities aimed at enriching their lives and increasing their brainpower.

Scientists have shown that parents who provide sincere encouragement and a loving environment are already on the right track to stimulating brain development, without

enlisting their children in a plethora of activities. In addition to this, avoiding the placement restrictions on their child's mind, body and voice, whenever possible during periods of play and outdoor physical activity, may be critical in giving children the tools they need to succeed later in life. We now recognize that children respond to many different types of learning styles and experiences, and that structured activities that may be appropriate for one child, may not be appropriate for another. In fact, trying to shape a child's imagination into an ideal "mold" of what we think childhood play should consist of, may actually inhibit mental growth and development.

Dr. Jane Healy, a learning specialist and author, suggests that parents and other caregivers keep the following points in mind when creating a play environment for children:

- Respond to your child with kind friendly words, rather than gestures or no response at all.
- Make your child's world a safe, comfortable place to be.
- Refrain from acting angry, shouting at, physically punishing or needlessly restricting your child. Messes can be cleaned up painlessly, but angry words are not as easily erased from a child's memory.
- Provide your child with toys that can be used to improve hand-eye coordination, such as building blocks, toys with moveable parts and creative materials that can be found easily in nature or around the house. Choose materials that allows the child to be an active, rather than a passive, participant.
- Look at your child often and show interest in their activities. Refrain from making suggestions or interjections that may inhibit their stream of thought.
- Provide outings such as a trip to the beach or to the post office, that allow a child to explore and learn about how the world operates and about the nature around them in their own unstructured way.
- Provide new things for your child to look at and manipulate in any way they choose. Allowing a young child to feel crinkly cellophane, mushy oatmeal, modeling clay or jiggly gelatin with their bare hands can be a learning experience for the senses far more valuable than any expensive toy.

We can allow ourselves to learn with our children by viewing the world from their perspective. If we greet each experience with an open mind and with the appreciation of a child, more opportunities will materialize for us, as well. We, as adults, should explore the nature of creative people we know and allow ourselves to be influenced by them. By doing this, we can offer new points of view to our children and set up situations in which they can gain new perspectives. Along with them, we can marvel at the complexities of the world and express awe in everyday phenomena. By allowing our children to scribble outside the lines and think "outside the box," we encourage them to be receptive to the unexpected and to regard everyday obstacles as opportunities, rather than as problems.

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