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Changing Times, Changing Play: Why Does It Matter?

by Diane E. Levin

“When we were growing up we were always outside on our own and didn’t have many toys. We had to use our imaginations. Our activities required us to interact with each other. Adults were not around. We had to resolve problems ourselves. When we were little, the big kids helped us. And then as we got older, we helped the younger kids. We hardly ever even see kids playing outside anymore.”

“We had freedom that allowed us to explore and figure out things ourselves. There was a creek that we were in for hours. We used sticks and mud and rocks and played there all day. We made it up as we went along. Today everything is structured. Children start having play dates when they are in preschool. And many parents try to get them to do academics and organized activities instead of play.”

“We didn’t have a toy for everything, so we had to pretend what something was. I can remember 10 different roles I gave my stuffed dog over several years of play. It’s a shame that today children are inside their houses glued to screens and not outside.”

“My mom is a gym teacher. She used to support young kids’ love of basic outdoor games like jump rope and hopscotch in gym class. Now she needs to spend more and more time just teaching kids how to play the games. She told me a story about parents who complained their kids were bored during recess. That used to be many kids’ favorite time of day; this illustrates how kids don’t know how or what to play anymore.”

These comments are from people, over 50 years old, who were interviewed by students in my course, “The Meaning and Development of Play,” about play when they were young.



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Common Themes

The quotes capture the many themes that come up in response to the following two questions:

- Do you think the play of children today is different from when you were growing up?
- If so, how do you think it has changed?

“Yes,” people say, over and over again, “Play is very different now.” And they are quite specific and often in uncanny agreement about the changes they see.

Loss of outdoor play. In the past, when both rural and urban children were not in school, they were outside playing with neighborhood children morning, noon, and night. Older children played with younger children and helped them when there were problems. Adults were rarely involved. Children explored neighborhoods and beyond, including nature areas. Today, children spend little independent time outdoors on their own and often have little regular contact with neighborhood children or with children of other ages. Many interviewees also talked about how there seem to be more worries about dangers outside the home now than there were when they were growing up.

Increasing dependence on screens. Again and again, the over-50-year-olds pointed to the fact that screen time has replaced outdoor time. Whether it is television, computers, or video games, they felt this is the central free-time activity for children today, whereas it was outdoor play in the past — often in all kinds of weather. They see many children today saying they are bored when they cannot have a screen.

Over-abundance of highly-structured toys. Interviewees said that they made do with few toys and play materials — balls, bicycles, roller skates, and materials found in nature are often mentioned. All were toys that could be used in many ways and grow with the child’s age and abilities. Indoors they had a few board games for use on rainy days and often a doll with a bit of equipment or a set of con-

struction materials, like Lincoln Logs.[®] They used these toys with others and alone, over and over for many years. Today they see children with rooms full of toys, many of which are linked to a popular television or movie fad that has come and gone — many of which only do one very specific thing. Thus, these toys quickly become boring and get dusty on the shelf.

Less imaginative play. Many interviewees report having made up pretend worlds when playing outside in the woods or in the neighborhood. Often, one particular theme would grow and develop over long periods of time. They also described imaginary worlds they created inside on rainy days, like playing school or space travel — alone or with siblings or friends. But they do not think children engage in this same kind of imaginative play now. They say children often become bored if they don't have something that does it for them (e.g., television) or shows them what to do (e.g., video games and electronic/push button toys). They also often imitate characters they have seen on the screen (violent characters for boys and 'sexy' characters for girls) and call it play, but is it?

There is an urgent need to come up with approaches to early childhood education that take into account what we know about the importance of play for development and learning in the early years, in the context of what is happening to play today.

Fewer ongoing play relationships with other children. In the past, children played with neighborhood friends over many years. They built a play history together. Each day they picked up on their play where they left off the day before. They went into each other's homes on rainy days without formal play dates and whatever adult was around helped them when help was needed.

Older children taught younger children games like hopscotch, kick ball, jump rope, and hand games. As younger children got older they took on the helping role with younger children, thereby learning about nurturing and caring in real-life situations. Similarly, siblings played together in the past, both indoors and out; whereas now many interviewees say that when families are together, siblings each have



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their own screens to use on their own in their own ways. Interviewees indicated that there has been a radical decline in this kind of social relationship building in the play lives of the children they see today.

Increasing role of adults in structuring play. Many interviewees pointed out the spontaneous play they created on their own and with neighbors and siblings when they were young. They say that today adults often create the so-called play experiences for children — through such things as formal play dates as well as formal lessons to teach a skill, such as organized sports, at younger and younger ages — skills that many children used to learn on their own or from each other.

The Benefits of Play

Scholars of early childhood education and development have long recognized the vital role of play in children's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development and learning:

- Play is a primary vehicle through which children construct knowledge and skills. Children use their play to try out new ideas and behaviors in their own unique, concrete, and hands-on ways, to see how they work, and to adapt them based on the information they collect as they play.
- Through play children develop an understanding of rule-governed behavior, give-and-take social relationships, cooperation, conflict-resolution skills, trust, and resiliency.
- They learn to act and think creatively, how to find and solve interesting problems — all skills that contribute to making meaning of more formal academic content later on.
- Through play, children develop the attitudes, values, and skills they need for school success — for instance, the belief that “I can do it!” — when confronted with learning challenges big and small (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011; Berk, 1994; Levin, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Piaget, 1951 and 1959).

Whether interviewees over 50 were rich or poor, lived in urban or rural settings, were only children or from large families, their descriptions of play from their childhoods repeatedly epitomized these characteristics of quality play. In sum, their play provided them with endless opportunities to learn at their own level, based on their own interests, in their own creative ways — playing with what they already knew to really master it and learning a wide range of vital skills in the process.

The Price Children Pay for the Loss of Play

A growing number of scholars and advocates are voicing concern about the nature of play today, similar to those raised in the interviews. They see the decline of quality, creative play at home and at school, and have identified a whole range of ways children's development and learning might suffer.

With the decline of play, children have fewer opportunities to try out their ideas and work out an understanding of experience (both good and bad) in their own ways.

Endangered physical health.

Rising levels of childhood obesity are occurring at the same time that children are increasingly glued to screens indoors and decreasingly moving around outdoors, both at home and at school. With decreasing imaginative and outdoor play, two of the strongest motivators for moving around and being active have

been undermined. In fact, it was concern about the physical wellbeing of today's children that was at the heart of First Lady Michelle Obama's decision to launch her National *Let's Move Campaign*.¹



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Threats to children's social development. When children play less at school, at home, on the playground, and in the neighborhood, they have fewer opportunities to interact with others or to learn all the lessons that interactions with others can teach. This can impede the development of such social skills such as empathy and perspective-taking, thereby undermining their ability to have caring, connected relationships. Can this help explain the rising levels of bullying and teasing being reported at younger and younger ages? Is the lack of creative play today contributing to what I have coined elsewhere, Compassion Deficit Disorder (CDD) (Levin, 2008)?

1 For more information about the *Let's Move Campaign*, see www.letsmove.gov/learn-facts/epidemic-childhood-obesity

2 For more information on the harm caused by the academics pushing down on play and more, see the website of Defending the Early Years: www.deyproject.org

Challenges to children's emotional wellbeing. With the decline of play, children have fewer opportunities to try out their ideas and work out an understanding of experience (both good and bad) in their own ways. This can prevent them from developing the sense of trust, safety, and autonomy that comes from child-controlled play. And this can undermine the inner sense of wellbeing children need to fully participate in their world. Without this, they will be more likely to depend on acquiring objects and screens instead of activities that they control and master. The importance of play for children's emotional wellbeing is supported by recent research that has linked increasing levels of psychopathology in children to the decline of meaningful play (Gray, 2011).

We need to be better facilitators of play than in the past because children and their play are different now.

Undermining cognitive development and academic learning.

Children pay a steep price when they follow someone else's program on a screen or with highly-structured toys and activities. Their ability to become problem-finders and -solvers is undermined, thereby jeopardizing a

central process through which they build new ideas onto what is already known, and generalize what is known to new and varied situations. This kind of figuring things out oneself through play is at the heart of meaningful intellectual development — for instance, an understanding of cause and effect, how to use one thing to represent another, putting fragmented pieces of an idea or experience into a more meaningful whole, and much more. I have metaphorically come to call this growing deficit, Problem Solving Deficit Disorder (PSDD) (Levin, 2011). So when play is jeopardized and children develop PSDD, the essential process of actively transforming experience into meaningful cognitive knowledge and skill will suffer.

Reclaiming Play for Children

When I work with teachers who have been in the field for many years, just like the gym teacher quoted at the beginning of this article, many of them affirm that they see a decline in the ability of young children to engage in quality play in their classrooms. Teachers describe 'free play' or 'choice time' as more often becoming a time when many children say they are 'bored' or finish activities very quickly without becoming deeply involved, or even have their activities end suddenly due to fights with other children. Thus, teachers find that just allowing time for play is not necessarily the answer to the challenged play of many children today.

At the same time, there is an increasing academic push down into early childhood settings and calls for high-stakes testing and teacher accountability to teach to these tests. This trend undermines the opportunities for play and learning through play for all children, but it does the biggest disservice to the children who most need help becoming creative players.²

There is an urgent need to come up with approaches to early childhood education that take into account what we know about the importance of play for development and learning in the early years, in the context of what is happening to play today (Miller & Almon, 2009). Here are some suggestions for how to begin.



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Learn from the play stories of previous generations.

Things have changed dramatically since the days when the people my students interviewed played as children. Along with changes in society, of course, there will be changes in play and other aspects of childhood. But while the content and form of play may change, the deep developmental needs that play served in the past are just as relevant and important now, and we should listen to them.

Put greater emphasis on facilitating play in early childhood settings. We need to be better facilitators of play than in the past because children and their play are different now. From the activities we choose, to the materials we put out and how they are organized, to how we help children plan for, develop, and reflect on their play, to how we integrate early academic skills such as literacy, numeracy, and science into their play, we need to get better at helping children become deeply engaged players in early childhood settings. It is through such efforts that we will help children become good problem solvers and learn the attitudes, values, and skills they need for successful and satisfying social, emotional, and academic learning later on.

Make studying play a central part of early childhood training. If professional programs cover play at all, few take into account the rapidly changing play landscape of today and what we can do about it. In these days of pressure to push down academics and many children needing help learning how to get the full benefits of play, early childhood professionals at the pre-service and in-service levels need better preparation now than ever.

Encourage more research on changing play. Research has not kept up with the rapid changes in the childhood play and learning environment. For instance, we need to know more specifics about how the changes in play described by the interviewees are affecting various aspects of children's development. And we need to know more about how play actually contributes to later success in learning academic skills and building social relationships, as well as how to best facilitate play in today's environment.

Help families understand what 'real' play is, why it's important, and how to promote it. While we can do much in group settings to promote healthy play for the children, what happens at home is still very important. Helping parents limit children's involvement in screens, choose toys carefully, and promote play that has qualities similar to those described by previous generations, is a vital part of promoting positive development and learning today. The organization Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Entertainment (TRUCE) (www.truceteachers.org) prepares materials to help you do this.

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