

Early childhood development

The power of play: 6 things you should know



Photo: Ed Kaiser

Play is becoming an endangered activity.

And that's not a good thing for our young children.

Play is absolutely essential to early development. Yet we persistently undervalue it and allow our kids fewer and fewer opportunities for the uninterrupted spontaneous free play that they need.

Early childhood development (ECD) experts are sounding the alarm bells about what they see as a serious undervaluation of play. Among them is Dr. Jane Hewes, chair of the Early Learning and Child Care program at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton.

Play is absolutely essential to children's development, says Dr. Hewes. "A large body of research supports this. Play is so important that it is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our public attitudes, policies and programs not only fail to recognize this, but they are eroding our children's opportunities to play."

How did this happen?



Jane Hewes

Advances in neuroscience increased public awareness of the importance of early experience, says Dr. Hewes. Growing public concern about children's "readiness for school" also put a new focus on the early acquisition of

academic skills and the direct teaching of numeracy and literacy in early education programs. Studies show that this approach does not bring long-term benefits. It can in fact have a negative impact on children's confidence in themselves as learners.

The overscheduling of children's lives has also undermined play, says Dr. Hewes. With both parents working in most families, young children now spend their days in structured care and education settings. Their recreational activities — indoor and outdoor — are also carefully constructed and monitored. Parents worry more about the safety of their children. These

concerns have dramatically altered children's play spaces, as has technology and changing urban environments.

What this all adds up to is a lot less time for "free" play, directed and controlled by children. Recent neuroscientific research confirms that there are significant benefits from spontaneous free play, however.

What can parents and other adults do? Dr. Hewes offers a number of suggestions:

1. Recognize the importance of play. Play is integral to every aspect of development and lays the foundation for formal learning and success in school. It underlies everything from motor development to social competence, emotional self-control, confidence, creativity, scientific reasoning and abstract thinking. Child's play is a serious business.
2. Understand that play is much more than running around outdoors. There are many forms of play. Sometimes play doesn't look like play. It can be complex and subtle. Experts define play as: controlled by the child, actively engaging, voluntary and intrinsically motivated.
3. Provide children with uninterrupted time (at least 45-60 minutes at a time) and rich, nurturing environments that stimulate exploration and discovery.
4. Facilitate play by taking an interest in it, carefully observing it and offering guidance and suggestions when play becomes frustrating or is about to be abandoned because children lack the skills or knowledge to continue. But don't take over.
5. Offer "emergent" curriculum in child care and early education programs. The curriculum should emerge from the child, focus on play and allow children to build their own understanding.
6. Slow down and stay in the present moment. Adults tend to live in the future. Play takes place in the present. Children live in the present. That's one of their gifts to adults.

For more information, download Dr. Hewes' article, *Let the Children Play: Nature's Answer to Early Learning*, http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ECLKC/lessons/Originalversion_LessonsinLearning.pdf