

# PLAY:

## THE SERIOUS, IMPORTANT WORK OF GROWING UP



**W**e live in a world focused on academic achievement, global competitiveness and student enrichment, where “stranger danger” lurks on every corner and the video screen is ubiquitous.

How do children play?

Where do they play? What do they play? And does it matter?

The Jessie Ball duPont Fund has invested in the welfare of children and youth for more than three decades, supporting their education, their health care, their safe passage through family and community crises. But have

we, and others, overlooked the basic activity of childhood? Play. The free-spirited, whimsical, spontaneous, sometimes rowdy richness of play.

In spring 2014, the Jessie Ball duPont Fund asked researchers with the Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center to explore the role of play in childhood development and learn what youth-serving organizations, community providers — and children — had to say on the subject.

These highlights from their report provide food for thought, reminding us all that play is something to be taken seriously.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY ‘PLAY’?

**PRETEND PLAY**—We all know what it means to pretend. Experts say pretend play is “symbolic behavior in which an object or person is treated as if it were something else.” Pretend play includes fantasy play, socio-dramatic play (pretending to be a teacher or cowboy) and acting out complex narratives.

**PHYSICAL PLAY**— This is play that uses the body, whether the kicking movements of an infant or the movements required to play T-ball. Physical play includes exercise and the rough-and-tumble play of pillow fights and playground tussles.

**CHILD-DIRECTED PLAY**— Child-directed play can be either Pretend or Physical, but it has a voluntary and spontaneous nature. Children are free to choose activities and choose playmates (or play alone).

**GUIDED PLAY**—Adults provide a loose structure but children still have significant autonomy, e.g., “Go outside and play on the swing set.” Guided play can be Pretend or Physical.

**STRUCTURED PLAY** — This is any type of activity or game that is organized by a set of rules or expectations — card games, board games, sports activities — but is usually not directed by the child. This, too, can be Pretend or Physical.

**PARENT-CHILD PLAY**—While we most often think of children playing with other children, Child-Adult Play, or Parent-Child Play also is important, helping build bonds within the family, developing social and emotional ties and allowing parents/adults to “listen” to the child as she or he guides play.



"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is the work of childhood." - Fred Rogers

# THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play can shape the way we interact with our social environment. Play can influence our self-esteem, social competence and self-control. Play helps us learn and grow cognitively. Play increases our physical activity, develops our motor skills and promotes an active lifestyle. In sum, play is essential to our social, emotional, cognitive and physical well-being.

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

During play, children learn how to manipulate objects, interact with others to foster development socially and emotionally, and learn the concepts of reciprocity and cause and effect. Play helps children develop emotional expressiveness, emotional knowledge and emotional regulation. Participation in child-directed play helps children learn conflict management, self-advocacy skills, negotiation and sharing. These skills are crucial components in learning how to work in groups and cooperate. Play enhances a child's emotional regulation and social competency and offers the opportunity to improve resiliency and self-esteem.

## COGNITIVE BENEFITS

Play is a significant vehicle for cognitive development and has been linked to the attainment of language skills, mathematics readiness, later academic achievement in math and overall improved cognitive functioning. Pretend play requires various cognitive strategies, such as negotiation, problem solving and goal seeking. Pretend play involves language, cognition, sensorimotor skills and emotion, and requires more advanced mental representation, as children have to maintain their understanding of reality but also hold on to false premises. Pretending helps children understand pretense in others and has been associated with improved reasoning abilities and problem solving skills.

## PHYSICAL BENEFITS

The American Academy of Pediatrics deems physical play so important that it recommends children participate in at least 60 minutes of playtime each day. Physical play allows children to develop motor skills and is one way to increase physical activity levels of young children, which has been linked to improved outcomes in weight, motor skill development and cardio-metabolic health for preschoolers. Rough-and-tumble play with peers is typical for school-aged children, and a higher level of physical activity during these years has well-established health benefits.

## MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS

In the broadest sense, play may be linked with increased stress tolerance, mood stability and improved mental health. Children who can engage in self-directed play may develop a "sense of self" that has been linked to an increased capacity for coping with stress. Play is an opportunity for a child to work through stress. In both adult and child populations, physical play or exercise has been associated with lowered levels of depression and anxiety and improved self-esteem. Play is a natural tool for children to develop resiliency as they learn to cooperate, overcome challenges and negotiate with others. In addition to increasing self-esteem and self-confidence, it provides a sense of independence and achievement, which is linked to the development of resiliency and coping mechanisms. Play leads to the development of social confidence and relationships, which will assist in the development and maintenance of future relationships.

With fewer quality public play spaces available, “pay to play” spaces have increased. From toddler “gyms” to climbing walls, these supervised play spaces have become a growing business sector, marketing to middle- and upper-class families. However, these resources are only available to those who can afford them.



## THE OBSTACLES TO PLAY

From the community to the school house to the home, obstacles to healthy play abound.

### IN THE COMMUNITY

Safety concerns are a pressing issue for parents, causing decline in outdoor play due to both perceived and actual safety threats. Fears of bullying, strangers, older children, traffic and general neighborhood safety inhibit outdoor play. Researchers see parents raising children in a “culture of fear” fueled by negative images in the media, stories of litigation, physical hazards and other dangers. As a result, children are not allowed to go far from home or even outside when unsupervised. Access to safe public outdoor play spaces is a primary issue for communities. According to KaBOOM! (2009 poll by Harris Interactive), 59% of parents reported having no play spaces within walking distance of their home. Many communities are built without sidewalks, bike paths or crosswalks. Low-income neighborhoods face particular challenges. The alternative to safe parks for low-income children is community centers and nonprofit organizations such as Police Athletic League and YMCA. If available, these programs may have limited space.

### AT HOME

The landscape of American families and community has shifted away from nuclear families and cohesive neighborhoods. Many children are reared in households with two working parents, a single parent or custodial grandparents. Neighbors may not know one another and do not supervise one another’s children. When the responsibility for supervising play falls solely to the parent, children’s outside play time can be limited. Teen parents may lack understanding of the importance of play or may not engage in sufficient play that is age appropriate with their children. Grandparents who are rearing children may suffer stress, depression and negative physical health consequences exaggerated by their caregiving responsibilities.

### IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Changes in school policy and demands for higher student test scores have reduced emphasis on play. Schools cut recess to prepare for testing, take away recess as a form of punishment and struggle with discipline and monitoring in the recess areas. Despite the clear benefits, time allocated for play has diminished for even the youngest of students. Changes in school policy disproportionately affect under-resourced school districts, which are working to reduce academic achievement gaps. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that 28% of schools with the highest poverty rates had no recess at all. In community organizations, policies and funding present challenges to play. Risk management policies increasingly require more staff to supervise children and more extensive staff background screening, increasing costs.

### CULTURAL & GENDER CONSIDERATIONS

More children are growing up in a sedentary culture, spending time “playing” with computers and video games. Sedentary lifestyles have serious consequences for health, education and development. Access to resources, religious values and values associated with economic success can be factors in the racial/ethnic differences in play. Black and Hispanic children were found to spend fewer hours playing sports and participating in outdoor activities and watched approximately two more hours of television per week than their white peers. Black children also were found to spend about two more hours attending religious services, and Black and Hispanic children were found to spend more time studying but less time reading for pleasure. In some households, children become the caregivers of younger children and have less access to play. Also the existence of expectations of gender norms on access to and types of play can impact play experiences.



“We have a contract to take our girls to a pool on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. The pool holds at least 100, but the only swimmers allowed in the pool from 1:30 until 3:30 are our 35 girls. All the other neighborhood children are excluded.... What a waste.”



## OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

Leaders of local youth-serving organizations and organizations that provide affordable housing alternatives were asked their thoughts about play and meeting children’s need for play.

### THE VALUE OF PLAY

Leaders of youth-serving and affordable housing agencies affirmed the value of play for the children they serve. They see play as advantageous to successful social-emotional, mental health, academic and physical outcomes. These leaders suggested that they and their peers would benefit from increased knowledge of services local agencies provide and increased partnership across organizations.

### PLANNING FOR PLAY

Many providers said they plan specifically for play. “When we do our projects, we try and make sure there is a playground and a space for kids to be kids,” said a housing provider. “When we start to plan a new project ... play spaces are incorporated.” Another said they partner with other organizations to provide play opportunities. A third said they integrate family into the play activities to facilitate future play in the home and to validate and integrate parental feedback into play activities. “[Incorporating play] has been an objective of ours since we started working with children.”

### POLICY BARRIERS

Policies and practices can create barriers to play, said several youth-serving organization leaders. Particularly, they noted that staffing restrictions eliminating one-on-one time between staff and youth inhibit playtime and bonding time. The “rule of three,” which refers to having at least two adults present at all times with youth, limits the ability to offer unstructured playtime to children.

### RESOURCES AND COSTS

Some providers indicated a lack of resources limited play opportunities for children and youth. Access to play equipment and safe places to play outdoors sometimes was limited. Additionally, agencies can face increased costs related to risk management: conducting staff background screenings and hiring sufficient personnel. “I wonder about these risk management policies causing our programs to cost more funding,” said one provider. “Staff salaries may be the cost that continues to rise as staff-child ratios get smaller. There is a need to hire more staff due to policies such as risk management ... along with other staff positions that are now necessary due to safety concerns.” Finally, providers expressed interest in having access to resources that they could share with families about the importance of play.



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