

The Vital Role of Play in Early Childhood Education

Joan Almon

“The ability to play is one of the principal criteria of mental health.”¹

In over 30 years of working with children, families, and teachers in Waldorf kindergartens all over the world, I have observed one consistent feature of childhood: creative play is a central activity in the lives of healthy children. Play helps children weave together all the elements of life as they experience it. It allows them to digest life and make it their own. It is an outlet for the fullness of their creativity, and it is an absolutely critical part of their childhood. With creative play, children blossom and flourish; without it, they suffer a serious decline. I am hardly the first to note this fact. The central importance of creative play in children’s healthy development is well supported by decades of research. And yet, children’s play, in the creative, open-ended sense in which I use the term, is now seriously endangered. The demise of play will certainly have serious consequences for children and for the future of childhood itself.

Parents, teachers, and mental health professionals alike, are expressing concern about children who do not play. Some seem blocked and unable to play. Others long to play, but policies and practices at home and in school have driven open-ended, selfdirected play out of their lives. Children no longer have the freedom to explore woods and fields and find their own special places. Informal neighborhood ball games are a thing of the past, as children are herded into athletic leagues at increasingly younger ages. Add to this mixture the hours spent sitting still in front of screens — television, video game, and computer — absorbing other people’s stories and imaginations, and the result is a steady decline in children’s play.

Increasingly, preschool and kindergarten children find themselves in school settings which feature scripted teaching, computerized learning, and standardized assessment. Physical education and recess are being eliminated; new schools are built without playgrounds. While allegedly, these approaches are providing “quality education,” they trivialize and undermine children’s natural capacities for meaningful and focused life lessons through creative play and this leaves many children profoundly alienated from their school experiences. I have observed the steady decline of play over the past 30 years, but even I was astonished by a recent call from a counselor in an elementary school in Virginia. She had been talking with a first grade class and used the word “imagination.” When they stared blankly at her, she explained its meaning, but the children continued to look puzzled. “You know,” she said, “it’s when you pretend to be someone you’re not,” and she gave an example from her own childhood when she loved to play Wonder Woman. She would put on a cape and fly down the hill near her house with arms outstretched, pretending to be aloft. “That’s imagination,” she explained. “But we don’t know how to do that,” said one child, and all the others nodded their heads in agreement. Not one child in that first grade seemed to know what imaginative play is.

The Nature of Play

If we are to save play, we must first understand its nature. Creative play is like a spring that bubbles up from deep within a child. It is refreshing and enlivening. It is a natural part of the make-up of every healthy child. The child's love of learning is intimately linked with a zest for play. Whether children are working on new physical skills, social relations, or cognitive content, they approach life with a playful spirit. As a friend said of her eightmonth- old recently, "It just seems that she's working all the time." But is it work or play? In childhood there is no distinction.

Adults are convinced that we need to "teach" young children. It is certainly true that we need to set an example in all kinds of activities. We also need to create appropriate spaces where children can play and learn, and we need to lend a helping hand — and at times even intervene when things are going wrong. But mostly we need to honor the innate capacity for learning that moves the limbs and fills the souls of every healthy young child.

Nathan at one year came with his parents to the summer house we share as a family. He was delighted to find several staircases in this house, for in his own home there was only one step, and he had long since mastered it. Now he gave full vent to his wish to climb stairs. Over and over he would climb up and down. We took turns standing guard, but he rarely needed our help. He was focused and concentrated, and did not like to be taken away from this activity. He gave every sign of being a happy, playful child while climbing, yet he was also clearly exploring and mastering a new skill and one that was important for his long-term development. Most important, it was a task he set for himself. No one could have told this one-year-old to devote hours to climbing. He did it himself, as will every healthy child whose sense of movement has not been disturbed.

Here is another example of child-initiated play that is also work. Ivana at age four came to kindergarten one Monday morning and proudly announced that she could tie her shoes. I must have looked skeptical, because it is beyond the skill level of most children her age. Ivana — determined to demonstrate her new prowess — promptly sat down on the floor and untied and then retied her shoes into perfect bows, looked at my astonished face, and beamed. Later in the day I asked her mother how Ivana had learned to do this. Her mother laughed and described how over the weekend she had pretended that she was going to a birthday party. She folded scraps of paper into little birthday packages. She then raided her mother's yarn basket and used pieces of yarn to tie the packages with bows. She probably tied 60 or 70 packages during the weekend until she had at last mastered the art of tying bows. She clearly felt ready, and she did her work in the spirit of play. If instead, someone had required Ivana to learn to tie her shoes before she signaled her readiness and interest, and proceeded to give her formal instruction, learning would have been transformed into a tedious and stressful task.

The simple truth is that young children are born with a most wonderful urge to grow and learn. They continually develop new skills and capacities, and if they are allowed to set the pace with a bit of help from the adult world they will work at all this in a playful and tireless way. Rather than respecting this innate drive to learn however, we treat children

as if they can learn only what we adults can teach them. We strip them of their innate confidence in directing their own learning, hurry them along, and often wear them out. It is no wonder that so many teachers complain that by age nine or 10, children seem burned out and uninterested in learning. This is a great tragedy, for the love of learning that Nathan and Ivana displayed can last a lifetime. Furthermore, it is intimately bound to our capacity to be creative and purposeful.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identified a creative state which he termed “flow,” and which I believe is comparable to the state that children enter into, when deeply engaged in play. In their book *Creative Spirit*, Goleman, Kaufman and Ray describe the state of “flow” as the time “when people are at their peak.”² Flow can happen in any domain or activity — while painting, playing chess, making love, anything. The one requirement is that your skills so perfectly match the demands of the moment that all self-consciousness disappears.”³ Csikszentmihalyi recounted the following vignette to illustrate the nature of “flow.”⁴ A neurosurgeon was deeply engrossed in a difficult operation. When the procedure was finished, he inquired about a pile of debris in the corner of the operating room. He was informed that part of the ceiling had caved in during the operation. The surgeon had been so engaged in the flow of his work that he had not heard a thing!

Children engaged in healthy play display a depth of concentration that can also be characterized by “flow.” I think of five-year-old Peter watching intently as two girls in the kindergarten were creating an especially beautiful play scene on a tabletop. They were deeply engrossed and so was he. It happened that on that day the fire department descended on us, because one of the teachers had called them after noticing an electrical odor in her room. Three fire engines roared up our driveway. Peter’s friend Benjamin ran up to him, crying, “Peter, Peter, the fire engines are here!” But Peter was so intent on watching the play scene that he did not respond. Benjamin tried again with the same result. He shrugged and rushed back to the window to watch the firemen arrive. Finally, Peter emerged from his concentration, saw the fire engines, and hurried to the window. The state of flow experienced by scientists, physicians, artists, and others can be intimidating. Do we want to enter so wholeheartedly into life and learning? It does not fit the contemporary picture of “multi-tasking” where one is doing many things at once, but usually none of them very deeply. Yet it is an important state of being if we want to flex our inner capacities to the fullest and offer our greatest gifts to the world.

The Development of Play

The secret to helping young children thrive is to keep the spirit of creativity and of playful learning alive and active. An important ingredient in this is our own work as adults, for children naturally imitate grownups. This inspires their play. Their learning is a combination of their own deep inner drive to grow and learn coupled with their imitation of the adults in their environment. These two elements interweave all through early childhood. They provide the underlying basis for play, yet their outer expression changes year by year as children develop.

An important milestone in play, the capacity for make-believe play — also known as fantasy play — occurs at around two and a half or three years of age. Before that, children are more oriented to the real world: their own bodies, simple household objects like pots, pans, and wooden spoons, and simple toys like dolls, trucks, and balls. Toddlers imitate what they see around them; common play themes include cooking, caring for baby, driving cars or trucks, and other everyday events.

These themes continue and expand after age three, but now children are less dependent on real objects and create what they need from anything that is at hand. Their ability to enter into make-believe allows them to transform a simple object into a play prop. A bowl becomes a ship, a stick becomes a fishing pole, a rock becomes a baby, and much, much more. The three-year-old becomes so engaged in make-believe play that objects seem to be in a constant state of transformation. No play episode is ever finished; it is always in the process of becoming something else. The playful three-year-old often leaves a trail of objects as her play evolves from one theme to the next.

In contrast, four-year-olds are generally more stationary and thematic in their play. They like to have a “house” to play in, which might also be a ship or a shop, and many enter the “pack-rat” stage where they fill their houses with objects so that it seems they cannot freely move around. This does not bother them at all, however. Like three-year-olds, they are inspired in the moment by the objects before them. They are quite spontaneous in their ideas for play.

The fantasy play of the five-year-old is characterized by the ability to have an idea and then play it out rather than being inspired in the moment by the object at hand as is the case with three and four year olds. Often, five-year-olds will announce what they want to play as they enter the kindergarten. Their mothers report that the children wake up in the morning with an idea for play in mind. Although they may play out the same theme for several days or weeks, subtle variations emerge as they gain focus, come in touch with their own ideas, and acquire the will to carry them out in playful detail.

There is one more important aspect to the development of make-believe play that usually does not occur until children are six years old. At this age they will often play out a situation without the use of props. They may build a house or castle but leave it unfurnished, then sit inside it and talk through their play, for now they are able to see the images clearly in their minds’ eyes. This stage can be described as imaginative play, for the children now have the capacity to form a well articulated inner image. It is around this time that a child will say something like “I can see Grandma whenever I want. I just have to close my eyes.” Or she may set up a play scene with her toys but close her eyes and play it out “inside.”⁵

In all of these stages of dramatic play children may play alone or with others. However, the way children engage in social play with others changes over the years. The one-year-old tends to play alone, while social play of two-year-olds is generally called parallel play, for young children play side by side without fully interacting with each other.⁶ I would characterize the play of three and four year olds as playmate play. The children enjoy playing with each other (with occasional squabbles as part of the play

experience), but generally they are not deeply invested in each other. They enjoy playing together when they are in nursery school, but tend to forget about each other when they are apart. An exception to this, in my experience, occurs among children whose families are friends or who carpool together. In such situations, life thrusts the children together outside the usual play times, and playmates become more like family members who play an important, abiding role in a child's life. Normally, however, children of this age happily play with their playmates in school and forget about them for the rest of the day.

The social play of five and six-year-olds is different. The doors to deeper social relationships are opening for them. They form friendships and talk about their friends at home. They think about their friends when they are apart. They may want to call them on the phone or visit in their homes. Mothers laugh over the social calendars they have to maintain, for suddenly their six-year-olds want to spend much time outside school with their friends. This may sound like a preview of adolescence and this stage is sometimes called "first adolescence." The sociodramatic play of this age group is rich and varied, and it is a great tragedy that so few children in the United States have a chance to fully experience it, for their time in kindergarten or first grade is generally fully devoted to academic subjects with little time left over for play. The absence of play in childhood may have long-lasting repercussions on the child's overall social development.

The Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Benefits of Play

In the 1970s and 80s, Israeli psychologist Sara Smilansky conducted groundbreaking research on the role of dramatic play and sociodramatic play in cognitive and socio-emotional development.⁷ She defines dramatic play as having four elements: the child undertakes a make-believe role; the child uses make-believe to transform objects into things necessary for the play; verbal descriptions or exclamations are used at times in place of actions or situations; and the play scenarios last at least ten minutes. In sociodramatic play these four elements are present plus two more: at least two players interact within the play scene, and there is some verbal communication involved with the play.

Observing three to six-year-olds, Smilansky developed a method of assessing children's play in preschool settings. Using her assessment tools, she and other researchers observed and assessed children from three to six at play in a number of pre-school settings in the U.S. and in Israel, observing children from a variety of socio-economic settings. They also assessed children's ability to organize and communicate thoughts and to engage in social interactions. In one study children were followed and tested in second grade in literacy and numeracy. Children's ability to engage in dramatic and sociodramatic play was found to be directly linked to a wealth of skills all of which are essential for academic success. Smilansky's findings are summarized below:⁸

Gains in Cognitive-Creative Activities

- Better verbalization
- Richer vocabulary

- Higher language comprehension
- Higher language level
- Better problem-solving strategies
- More curiosity
- Better ability to take on the perspective of another
- Higher intellectual competence
- Better peer cooperation
- Reduced aggression
- More group activity

Gains in Socioemotional Activities

- More playing with peers
- Better ability to take on the perspective of others
- More empathy
- Better control of impulsive actions
- Better prediction of others' preferences and desires
- Better emotional and social adjustment
- More innovation
- More imaginativeness
- Longer attention span
- Greater attention ability
- Performance of more conservation tasks

Smilansky concludes: Sociodramatic play activates resources that stimulate emotional, social, and intellectual growth in the child, which in turn affects the child's success in school.⁹ We saw many similarities between patterns of behavior bringing about successful sociodramatic play experiences and patterns of behavior required for successful integration into the school situation. For example, problem solving in most school subjects requires a great deal of make-believe: visualizing how the Eskimos live, reading stories, imagining a story and writing it down, solving arithmetic problems, and determining what will come next. History, geography, and literature are all make-believe. All of these are conceptual constructions that are never directly experienced by the child.

Smilansky's research points to the fact that imagination is as important a medium for learning in the elementary-school years, as is make-believe for the pre-school child. If a child has been allowed to engage in make-believe play during the nurseryschool and kindergarten years and to develop inner imagination before entering first grade, she is then ripe and ready to learn. While one or another may have a learning difficulty, their enthusiasm for learning — and for overcoming difficulties — is enormous. By contrast, when a child has not had rich play opportunities, and/or the curriculum fails to engage the imagination, learning is a dull affair. My own experience has also been that the children who were the most active players in the kindergarten were also the most active learners in elementary school.

A study conducted in the 1970s in Germany, at a time when many kindergartens were being transformed into academic rather than play-oriented environments, bears out the relationship between preschool play and elementary school success. The study compared 50 play-oriented kindergartens with 50 academically oriented ones. The children were followed until fourth grade, at which point the children from the play-oriented kindergartens excelled over the others in every area measured — physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. The results were especially striking among lower-income children, who clearly benefited from the play-oriented approach. The overall results were so compelling that Germany switched all its kindergartens back to being play-oriented.¹⁰ They have continued in this mode until the present time, although during recent visits to Germany I hear more of the rhetoric one hears in this country: that to prepare children for a globalized economy they must get a head start on literacy, numeracy, and other subjects.

The benefits of play-oriented preschool programs were also established in a series of studies that examined early childhood programs in Ypsilanti, Michigan. In one study, 69 low-income three- and four-year-old children, who were at high risk for school failure, were randomly assigned to one of three types of programs: the High/Scope program and a traditional nursery school both encouraged child-initiated play activities, while the Direct Instruction approach did not. I.Q. scores rose in all three programs, but various social indicators showed that the children in the programs encouraging self-initiated activity, including play, were faring significantly better than the children in the more academic, Direct Instruction program. At age 15, the following results were noted:

Initially, all three curriculum approaches improved young children's intellectual performance substantially, with the average IQs of children in all three groups rising 27 points. By age 15 however, students in the High/Scope group and the Nursery School group ...reported only half as much delinquent activity as the students in the Direct Instruction group...¹¹

Findings at age 23 continue to support the conclusion that the High/Scope and Nursery School groups are better off than the Direct Instruction group in a variety of ways. Either the High/Scope group, the Nursery School group, or both, show statistically significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group on 17 variables. Most important, compared with the Direct Instruction Group, the High/Scope and Nursery School groups have had significantly fewer felony arrests of various kinds and fewer years of special education for emotional impairment. In addition, compared with the Direct Instruction group, the High/Scope group aspires to complete a higher level of schooling. It thus appears that preschool programs that promote child-initiated play activities contribute to the development of an individual's sense of personal and social responsibility.

A recent study by Rebecca Marcon of the University of North Florida found similar results when children from different pre-school programs were followed through fourth grade. Those who had attended play-oriented programs where childinitiated activities predominated did better academically than those who had attended academic-oriented programs.¹²

The Demise of Play in Early Childhood Education

Given the compelling evidence for the importance of self-initiated creative play for social, emotional, and intellectual growth, it is alarming that play has lost so much ground in young children's lives during the past 30 years. Since the 1970s, it has become common for public kindergartens in the United States to focus so strongly on academic achievement that there is little or no time devoted to self-directed play.

Kindergarten teachers in Pennsylvania told me that in their school district the kindergarten curriculum had been prescribed by the state legislature. Each morning children were to spend 20 minutes each on reading, writing, arithmetic, social studies, science, and so on. One teacher looked nervously over her shoulder and whispered, "I break the law every day and let my children play for fifteen minutes." The other kindergarten teacher sadly admitted that she only managed to bring in play twice a week for short periods.

That was in the mid-1980s. Since then the situation has become even more grim. The first-grade curriculum has become entrenched in the kindergarten. With standardized testing starting ever earlier — for five-year-olds in some districts — an atmosphere of hurry and pressure pervades the kindergarten. To ease the pressure a bit many states have raised the entrance age for kindergarten so that the youngest children are usually five when they enter rather than four years and nine months, was the case when I was a child. On the other hand, there is such concern about five-year-olds learning enough that many school districts are switching to full-day kindergartens. One might hope that half the day would be devoted to play and the arts, but I have not heard any reports of that being the case.

Even when opportunities for play are made available to children in the classroom, chronic media exposure has a direct negative effect on their ability to make use of these opportunities. As a kindergarten teacher it became easy for me to recognize which children were "television children," that is, children for whom TV was a steady influence in their lives. Such children often had difficulty finding their own ideas in play and were prone to acting out the ideas they had seen on the screen. In severe cases, these media children could only play out roles they had seen and became very upset if other children wanted to change the play scenario.

In *What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?* Susan Ohanian takes a hard look at what is happening to young children in school today. She refers to New York Public School 9, which is bucking the trend by providing kindergarten children with recess: "In a seven-hour day, they get 25 minutes free from academics." ¹³ Anyone who has had experience with five-year-olds will know that 25 minutes of free time in a seven-hour day will not suffice.

Ohanian also describes the situation in Chicago's public kindergartens, referring to a report in the *New York Times* by Jacques Steinberg:

The teacher knows it's the 53d day because "Day:053" is printed at the top of the recommended lesson plan open on her desk, a thick white binder crammed with goals for each day and step-by-step questions given to her and the city's 26,000 other teachers by the school system's administrators at the start of the school year. The page also identifies the section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to which that day's entry corresponds Every teacher in Chicago gets this day-by-day outline of what should be taught in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The New York Times reporter notes that some see this as the logical outcome of the standards movement, providing "an almost ironclad guarantee that all students will be exposed to the same material and that all teachers, regardless of qualification, will know exactly how to present it." ¹⁴

In the face of such demands on five-year-olds and their teachers, to speak of play seems almost frivolous. Yet five-year-olds are young children. Where did we ever get the idea that they should be on the fast track to high scores and global careers? We are on a slippery slope heading downhill, and the pace is accelerating. Must we find our children broken on the rocks of our fears and ambitions before we call a halt?

And we're not at the bottom yet. In the name of early literacy, plans are being developed to refocus nursery-school children away from play and toward early reading. There are aspects of early literacy that young children need: a rich experience of language spoken by caring adults, nursery rhymes and verses, storytelling and puppetry, and books read aloud. All these lay a vital foundation for a lifetime love of language and reading. But the term "early literacy" is coming to imply something much narrower than that.

As this is being written in the winter of 2003, Head Start is scheduled for reauthorization by Congress during this year. On January 17, 2003, the Washington Post described the President's intention to have all four-year-olds in Head Start assessed as to how much they learned in terms of early literacy and early numeracy. The purpose is to evaluate the success of Head Start programs. As always, there is something positive to be said about assessment, but when the stakes are too high and the means of measuring too narrow, serious abuses enter the system, and it is the children who bear the brunt of the problem. Many Head Start teachers are already feeling considerable pressure to give up play time and focus on early literacy, and this situation will only grow worse. ¹⁵

Even before the new plan for assessment was announced Susan Ohanian wrote about the growing stress on early literacy in Head Start in this way:

With all good intentions the current Bush administration is advocating a rigorous skill model for Head Start preschool programs across the country. Three- and four-year-olds are drilled about letters, dividing words into syllables and spelling. The plan is that this will prepare poor children to learn to read when they go to kindergarten. The Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees Head Start, is developing a curriculum that every Head Start teacher will be expected to follow. ¹⁶

It is not just the 900,000 children in Head Start that are being targeted for early literacy programs, however, it is all young children in the U.S. In spring 2002, legislation was introduced by the Senate H.E.L.P. Committee, then chaired by Senator Ted Kennedy, to make more funds available to early education programs in each state. A total of one billion dollars per year was anticipated. The legislation, initially called S.2566, Early Care and Education Act, addresses the importance of physical, social, and emotional development as well as early literacy.¹⁷

While in theory, this is a positive development, in practice, the legislation calls for bonuses to be given to states that can show gains in children's school preparedness. This will almost certainly result in a sharpened focus on early literacy activities for three- and four-year-olds. Much more time will be spent on learning the alphabet, breaking words into parts, basic reading skills, and the like. We have seen this pattern before in kindergarten: soon there will be no time left for play in preschool literacy.

Children are not machines. You cannot simply add more fuel and speed them up. They are governed by internal processes that are sometimes called the laws of child development. We cannot ignore these natural developmental timetables without doing serious harm to children. This harm touches many areas of their lives — physical, emotional, social, and intellectual.

The Alliance for Childhood, of which I am the U.S. coordinator, submitted a position statement to the Senate committee that was drafting the Early Care and Education Act mentioned above. The statement was endorsed by some of the leading experts on child development in the U.S., including T. Berry Brazelton, David Elkind, Jane Healy, Stanley Greenspan, and Alvin Poussaint. It read, in part:

The key to developing literacy — and all other skills — is to pace the learning so that it is consistent with the child's development, enabling him or her to succeed at the early stages. Ensure this initial success and the child's natural love of learning blooms. Doom him to failure in the beginning by making inappropriate demands and he may well be unable to overcome the resulting sense of inadequacy. This is especially true of children whose families are already under social and economic stress.¹⁸

There are many individuals and organizations committed to restoring play to young children's lives. One reason it is difficult to make progress, however, is that many parents misguidedly prefer that their young children focus on academics. Their concern about their children's future easily turns to fear. They then place considerable pressure on nursery and kindergarten teachers. An October, 1995, report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) entitled *Readiness for Kindergarten: Parent and Teacher Beliefs* found that

Parents of a majority of preschoolers believe that knowing the letters of the alphabet, being able to count to 20 or more, and using pencils and paint brushes are very important or essential for a child to be ready for kindergarten, while few kindergarten teachers share these beliefs...[C]

ompared with teachers, parents place greater importance on academic skills (e.g., counting, writing, and reading) and prefer classroom practices that are more academically oriented. One reason for this may be that parents perceive that there are specific activities they can do to teach their children school-related basic skills, whereas ways of changing the social maturity or temperamental characteristics of their children are less apparent.¹⁹

If there is one piece of advice I would offer parents regarding play and early academics, it would be to relax and stop hurrying their children. Children have such deep resources for growth and learning that with good nurture and reasonable help, most will succeed wonderfully. Some will need special help and can be given it. This is a hard message to convey however, especially in America, where we are committed to growing our children faster and better than anyone else. There is a story that Piaget, the great Swiss psychologist, did not like to speak to American audiences. After he had described the natural pattern of children's development, Americans would invariably ask, "Yes, but how can we get them to do things faster?" Compared to the young of other mammals, our children take much longer to mature. Our children deserve the right to grow and ripen at a human pace. A major part of this is allowing time for play.

The Demise of Play and Children's Health

The absence of play is generally a sign of illness in children. Parents, for instance, will often describe the severity of a child's illness in terms of whether or not the child continued to play. "He had chicken pox," a parent might report, "but it wasn't too serious. He was playing the whole time." Or another mother might say of her child, "She was really sick. She didn't want to play at all."

Parents' instinctive wisdom that links play and health was confirmed by Stuart Brown, a retired psychiatrist who founded the Institute for Play in Carmel, California.²⁰ As a young doctor in Texas he worked with very ill children, some of whom did not recover. Over time, Brown began to notice a pattern. Occasionally, a very sick child would develop a playful gleam in his eyes. He would check the charts and find that although the child's fever was still high, or the blood tests still worrisome, usually within a day's time the outlook would brighten. He came to realize that the return of a playful spirit was an excellent predictor of recovery in his young charges.

Given the relationship between health and play, what then are the implications of the demise of play for children's mental and physical health? Are there accompanying signs of illness in children today? Research does in fact indicate that this is the case. The growing number of suicides among children and youth is a powerful and tragic indictment of contemporary trends in childhood. Between 1952 and 1996, rates of suicide among adolescents tripled. Suicide is currently the fourth leading cause of death among children between the ages of 10-14.²¹

In recent years, former Surgeon General David Satcher sounded the alarm about children's physical and mental health. In 2001, he issued a "Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity" which stated that in 1999 about 13% of children and adolescents were overweight.²² Since 1980 this number had doubled for children and tripled for adolescents. Type 2 diabetes, previously considered an adult disease, and closely linked to overweight and obesity, has increased dramatically in children and adolescents.

In 2000, Satcher organized a conference to address the growing crisis in children's mental health. A report on his Web site states the following:

The nation is facing a public crisis in mental healthcare for infants, children and adolescents. Many children have mental health problems that interfere with normal development and functioning. In the United States, one in 10 children and adolescents suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment. Recent evidence compiled by the World Health Organization indicates that by the year 2020, childhood neuropsychiatric disorders will rise proportionately by over 50 percent, internationally, to become one of the five most common causes of morbidity, mortality, and disability among children.²³

In the past decade growing numbers of children have been diagnosed with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and several million receive potent stimulant medication such as Ritalin each year. The Center for Disease Control reports that the American Psychiatric Association estimates 3 to 7% of children suffer from ADHD and that some studies show an even higher percentage.²⁴

Diagnoses of Autistic Spectrum Disorders in children (Asperger's Disorder in particular) have also increased dramatically. In the State of California for example, cases of autism grew from 3,864 to 11,995 between 1987 and 1998, an increase of 210%,²⁵ and the median age of the patients dropped from 15 to nine years of age.²⁶

A striking feature of these health trends is that, unlike the traditional illnesses of childhood that are especially prevalent among poor children in developing nations, the health concerns I refer to are affecting children across the socio-economic spectrum in technologically advanced nations, often beginning in the United States, and then slowly "spreading" to other technologically advanced nations.

It is crucial that we ask ourselves the difficult question, What is it about our contemporary lifestyle that is causing or contributing to so much illness in children? I wish I could report on one single cause, for then we could turn our full attention to it and eradicate the source as we have done with small pox and other illnesses. Rather, children's lives have changed significantly in myriad ways during the past 50 years and many of these changes are stressful. Healthy children can cope with one or two stressors — and one can even argue that they grow stronger through some adversity. Yet few children can cope well with five or six unhealthy factors that are constant and permeate their lives.

This is especially true when the most basic of all human needs is not being met — the need for consistent love and care of devoted parents and other adults. Thus, when the home life is stressed or too hurried, when childcare is of mediocre quality with little possibility for lasting bonds with loving caregivers, when pre-school demands “too much too soon” in the areas of literacy and numeracy, when hours are spent each day sitting still in front of screens, and the diet is frequently filled with too much sugar, fat and food additives, we have a situation that is bound to wreak havoc on a young child’s health. Stressors affect each of us differently depending on our underlying temperament and constitution, and so we see a range of stress related illnesses in our children. This is a health picture in urgent need of further investigation, and it would be excellent if the Surgeon General along with national health organizations could work together to define the scope of the problem and the contributing factors. We may not like their conclusions, however, for it is a hard truth to swallow that our current lifestyle is harming our children even as it is harming our environment and our global relations with others. The decline in play appears not only to be a serious problem in itself, but it may also be the canary in the mineshaft that is pointing us toward much more serious, lasting problems in children’s lives.

Fostering Healthy Play in the Preschool and Kindergarten Classroom

The Physical Environment

In order to foster healthy play in the classroom, it is important to create an optimal environment. To a large extent, any space will do if the right mood and orientation for play exists. I once taught in a summer program for young children that took place on a large college campus. There was no fenced area for the children or other obvious safe space for their play. There were, however, two mounds of earth left from a construction project. Knowing that young children love to play on hills, we adopted these mounds as our playground. My co-teacher would seat herself on the grass between the mounds and weave wonderful grass nests or make other simple toys from the grass. The children happily played on the mounds for at least an hour a day for the three weeks of the program. They also went for walks across the campus but were always very content to come back to their small and simple play area. This was an unusual situation and certainly not one to normally recommend, but it was a wonderful lesson in how little space and equipment children actually need to be engaged players. It also echoes the experience of children in poor countries playing on the garbage heaps that litter their landscape. Their toys are the objects of the trash heap, such as tin cans. Their surroundings may be unhygienic and even dangerous, but in many cases their lives are rich in play.

By contrast, many children today are bombarded with an overabundance of toys and other play objects as well as by an overload of sense impressions. These can actually interfere with their play. The newborn’s cradle, for instance, is often so festooned with patterns and prints, mobiles and toys that one wonders how the poor baby will find peace for sleeping. It used to be that an infant’s cradle was protected by draped cloths that kept the world a bit away and created a sense of peace. This is no longer the case.

By the time the child is in nursery school or kindergarten, he is surrounded on every side by walls covered with pictures and charts with bright colors, words and numbers. There is often not a square foot of peaceful wall space where a child can safely rest his gaze and daydream. Everything is designed to wake the child up. Stimulation is the call of the day, but in truth it amounts to massive overstimulation of the young child's nervous system. Few adults would choose to work in such an environment, for they would find it impossible to concentrate; yet we subject children to it daily.

It is also true that you can create environments that are under-stimulating for children, and I have been in such environments in some of the township Educare programs in South Africa where the rooms are bleak and there is nothing adorning the walls. There are also few toys or other play materials. I have seen 50 or more children in such a room and to keep order the teachers insist that the children stay in their chairs most of the time. That is clearly an unhealthy situation with far too little activity or sense stimulation of any kind for the children. But we need to realize that over-stimulation can be just as much of a problem as under-stimulation and pay more attention to our excesses.

In my early years of teaching I experimented with different play environments. I gradually found that the children were most relaxed and played best if the space was fairly simple but pleasing to the senses. It should be calming and lovely, but not so beautiful and complete that the children hesitate to move anything or disturb the order. Play is a messy business in the best sense of the word, for it is hard to create without making a mess. A good play environment invites you to come in and change it — but it is orderly enough that it is easy to clean it up again. There's a place for everything and it becomes fun for the children to know where each object lives and put it back at the end of play time. When clean-up is handled through imitation of adults who enjoy it and do it in a cheerful mood, most of the children participate as wholeheartedly as in play itself.

For pre-school children, the simpler the play materials the more effective they are for stimulating creative play. A variety of plain cloths, for instance, can be used in dozens of ways — from capes and gowns to the roofs and walls of houses. Simple logs and stumps serve as building materials. For a few years I had both wooden "unit" blocks and wooden logs in my kindergarten for building. I observed that with the unit blocks, the standard wooden blocks that are cut along mathematical principles to represent one square "unit" or multiples of that, the children tended to use small cars and other man-made materials. With the logs the children gravitated more to natural materials such as shells and stones and to simple handmade dolls and animals for their play. The children also became more inventive with their play materials, making or finding what they needed to complete their play. Gradually I disposed of the unit blocks (this is practically a heresy for an American pre-school teacher to admit) and just gave the children logs for building. They never complained and their play grew stronger and more creative.

The presence of natural materials such as wool, cotton and silk, stones, wood and metals also filled the environment with life. These provide a healthy stimulus for the senses and the children quickly learn that things feel different and have different aromas

and qualities, such as being cool or warm to the touch. Most kindergartens today are filled with plastic that is cool to the touch and does not warm up as children handle it. In addition, everything ends up feeling much the same whether it is a truck or a doll.

Boys, in particular, are strongly drawn to wheeled vehicles and will often play with nothing else if a car is at hand. I wanted the children in my kindergarten to explore the full range of play materials and after a while I eliminated all wheeled vehicles from my kindergarten. The children created their own cars from logs and boards when they wanted one. A side blessing was that with the absence of cars most of the machine noises that the children made to accompany their car play also disappeared. Eventually the only wheels we had were on our carpet sweeper which may account for why the boys especially loved to clean the carpet.

Generally within 15 minutes of the children's arrival, the kindergarten would be completely transformed with almost everything in use. A group of 20 children could easily create six or seven play areas for themselves. There was a fair amount of negotiation that took place as they sorted out who was going to use what and in which area. Occasionally they needed help with this process especially in the beginning of the school year, but they soon developed their own techniques for dividing up the materials. Adjustments were sometimes made as the play time progressed, especially if one group had clearly taken more than they needed while others were undersupplied.

The Role of the Adult in a Play Oriented Classroom

The role of the adult in a play oriented preschool or kindergarten is critical but subtle. A teacher can easily dominate the play situation, overriding the children's own initiative, or through frequent questions and conversation, can force children to become too conscious and purposeful in their play. The latter is a common situation in play programs today.

Offering Children Suggestions:

Sara Smilansky researched the impact of adult intervention on children's play and demonstrated that when adults encouraged children to role play, enact fairy tales etc., there were significant gains in children's ability to play. Yet through questionnaires given to 120 preschool teachers, half in the U.S. and half in Israel, she found the following:

All reported that there was a playhouse corner in their room and that children could play in it for at least 30 minutes each day; however, most thought play was only good for developing personality and furthering social and emotional development. 90% said they did not feel it prepared children for future success in school.

They assumed children would learn to play by watching other children and that they did not need to do very much to help children play.

None of the teachers had been trained in the use of play. They did not remember a university course on the importance of play or on how to help facilitate play.²⁷

Smilansky concludes that, “Basic attitudes clearly need changing... It is clear that play expresses the child’s ongoing intellectual, social and emotional development and growth. This growth, like any other, can be aided by teachers with sensitivity to the child’s needs, wishes, and current status.”²⁸

Modeling Healthy Work:

Decades of classroom experience, and observation of Waldorf kindergarten teachers both in the United States and Europe have convinced me of the central importance of imitation for stimulating healthy play. Young children are physically active, and have a strong but usually unfocused will, which contributes to the turbulence of their behavior. Young children are inspired by the sense of purpose that adults bring to their work. When the teacher spends time each day engaged in the practical household work of the kindergarten such as cooking, sewing, gardening and woodworking, the children use this as a model for their own focused play, and the more deeply focused the teacher is in her work, the more focused the children are in their play. In addition, young children have a strong desire to imitate the teacher and will work alongside her for a period of time which draws the children into a closer relationship with her, while acquiring new skills.

A recent experience in Tanzania helps illustrate the relationship between adult work and children’s play. During a recent visit to a Waldorf school in Dar es Salaam, I was scheduled to spend a couple of hours with a new kindergarten teacher who had been specially trained to work creatively with small groups of children. It was a wonderful experience to watch her playfully interact with one or two children, but a class of 25 active children was rather overwhelming for her. Each time I passed her kindergarten I could hear the sounds of chaos. I felt great sympathy for her because it reminded me of my own early kindergartens, but I was perplexed as to how to best help her in such a short period of time. On the morning of my visit to her kindergarten, I arrived early and asked the teacher if there was some work I could do. She looked rather blank and said she did all her work for the kindergarten at home in the evenings and there was no work to be done. “No, no” I declared without much tact, “in the kindergarten we do the work in front of the children. That inspires their play.”

I looked around her rather sparse kindergarten for some sort of work materials such as sandpaper or furniture polish. Any meaningful work would do, but all I could find was a basket of yarn scraps from a project that was underway. The tangle of yarn pieces, each perhaps 18 inches long, was not too inspiring but better than nothing. As the children entered, they found me at a table untangling the yarn and winding tiny balls of yarn while singing a little song. The children were fascinated and soon all 25 were gathered around the table watching intently. When the last little ball was rolled, the whole class turned, like a flock of birds, and spread into every corner of the room, rearranging the furniture and props into play structures including houses, shops, a bus made of chairs and a plane made of a table. For the next hour they played with all the focus and vigor one could ever hope for from a group of three to six year olds.

The Art of Intervention:

It is critical that the teacher has her ears wide open to all the sounds of the kindergarten so that she knows when intervention is necessary. Some children get over-excited or upset in play but can work this out themselves. In other cases the teacher needs to intervene quickly before chaos results and a child gets hurt. Gradually the teacher comes to know the sounds of her kindergarten as a mother knows the sounds of her child's cries. She knows when to help a particular child and when to sit still.

Direct adult intervention is needed if a child is about to hurt himself, another person or an object. Sometimes it suffices to simply redirect a young child. For children age five and under one can teach a great deal about appropriate behavior through the "royal we" as in "We don't take other children's toys, hit children, etc." By age six children generally welcome a quiet but more direct "no" and clear indications as to what is possible.

If a child needs to be removed from a turbulent play situation, bringing her to the teacher's work table or providing her with a quiet space and a basket of smaller play things, such as little logs, polished stones, dolls and animals helps her to reengage in play albeit in a more quiet and focused way. After a short while, the child is sufficiently calm and centered to play with others.

Supporting Healthy Play at Home

Parents today feel tremendous pressure from many directions, including from government agencies and corporate advertisers, to stimulate their children and promote their intellectual development at ever younger ages. While some children do need additional stimulation, there are many who are being over-stimulated. It is important that parents seek the right balance for their own children, a balance that allows for growth and development without stress and ample time for play each day.

There are a number of things parents can do at home to support healthy play. One is to develop a deep appreciation of their child's play, and the ways in which the child reveals his own unique nature through play. Through simple observation and quiet appreciation, parents communicate the message that play is good. Giving space and time for play is vital, especially in our over-filled lives, as is offering simple play materials, often drawn from household objects. For example, babies and toddlers love playing with pots and pans, wooden spoons and other commonly used objects. Children engaged in imaginative play love having a sheet draped over furniture and creating tents, houses and ships.

Including purposeful, physical work in the daily routine of the home is a great help in inspiring children's play. It is important for parents or caregivers to spend time each day working with their hands at comprehensible tasks, in the presence of their child, whether it is raking leaves, baking, or hammering a nail. The old adage of "whistle while you work" has meaning here, for although one does not need to actually whistle, a happy mood while doing work draws children near and motivates them in their play, while a grumbling, unhappy attitude on the part of the adult keeps children away.

A growing problem for young children today is the amount of time they spend in front of screens — television, video, and computer. TV Turn-off Network cites figures from the Nielson Media report of 2000 which indicate that children from 2 to 17 spend on average 19 hours and 40 minutes per week (or nearly three hours per day) watching television. Combining videos and computers, children spend a total of nearly five hours per day in front of screens.²⁹

In addition, many children are profoundly influenced by the often violent, fast paced and sexual content of television, films and computer games that they are routinely subjected to. This precocious exposure to the world around them can engender fear and mistrust, rendering it difficult for them to relax and imitate their caregivers and teachers. In imitation there is a breathing in and out of one another, which requires a relaxed state and a trustful outlook. In addition, when children observe their parents at home, they are often sitting in front of a computer screen performing an abstract task that does not offer the raw materials and physical gestures necessary to inspire focused, creative play.

The weakening of imitation makes it far more difficult for children to play, but it also makes it hard for them to relate to other human beings in the simple, relaxed way that children normally have. This can have long-lasting implications for their social and psychological development. For all these reasons, it is of the utmost importance that parents both minimize and supervise their children's exposure to screen based media or, better yet, eliminate it altogether from their children's daily routines. Most children show wonderful signs of recovery within a week or two after the removal of screen time from their lives, especially if there is an increase in human interaction.

As a kindergarten teacher committed to helping children with creative play, I was struck by how quickly one could see the difference in children's play according to whether their media viewing at home was growing or declining. Research could be done on this that could help parents and educators understand the direct negative relationship between media engagement and self-directed, creative play on the part of young children.

Launching a National Effort to Restore Play

As play disappears from the landscape of childhood, we need to recognize that its demise will have a lasting impact. Decades of compelling research have shown that without play, children's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development is compromised. They will develop without much imagination and creativity. Their capacity for communication will be diminished and their tendency towards aggressiveness and violence will increase. In short, human nature as we have known it will be profoundly altered, intensifying many of the problems that are already afflicting children and society. If we do not invest in play, we will find ourselves investing much more in prisons and hospitals, as the incidence of physical, and mental illness, as well as aggressive and violent behavior escalates.

It is not too late, however, to commit ourselves to reestablishing play in children's lives. Here are some suggestions:

- **Study the importance of play in children's lives.** Appoint a blue ribbon commission of respected individuals with expertise in child development, play and education, including those representing national organizations that focus on these areas, to thoroughly investigate the importance of play and its essential nature in early childhood, underscoring, as appropriate, the message that it cannot be displaced without doing serious harm to children.
- **Assess early literacy and numeracy.** An honest assessment is needed of the success or failure of direct instruction and other early academic approaches in kindergartens and nursery programs. We must stop politicizing education and instead focus on the question of what children need for their long-term healthy development.
- **Clarify the health picture of children today, including the increase in mental illnesses.** Appoint a blue ribbon commission with the Surgeon General and other prominent health care professionals from the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Health and Human Services, and national organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Academy of Pediatrics to elucidate and draw attention to the dramatic increase in psychological disturbance among children.
- **Organize a massive public education campaign about play.** Before it is too late and play has completely slipped out of the lives of young children, we need to organize public awareness campaigns about play's importance, directed at parents, teachers and policy makers. How to fund such a campaign? Perhaps we should imitate California in this regard; through Proposition 10 the State has levied new cigarette taxes with all the funds raised being earmarked for early childhood programs.

These are major national efforts, and they will take much focus and energy, but the old adage still holds that where there's a will there's a way. If we want to help today's children, we will need to move quickly. It is hard, although not impossible, to reawaken the spirit of play in an adolescent or an adult through story telling, the arts and other means if they did not experience play in childhood. It is important that we bring play to those who missed it, but even more important that we protect children's right to play through a concerted effort in homes, schools and communities. In light of the concerted effort of corporations and government agencies to banish open-ended creative play and replace it with much narrower, defined play or focused learning of letters and numbers at ever earlier ages, it has become imperative that we band together and create a protective circle around childhood and the child's need and right to play.

References

- 1 A. Montagu, *Growing Young* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981).
- 2 D. Goleman, P. Kaufman, and M. Ray, *The Creative Spirit* (New York: Dutton, 1992).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 46. 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 F. Jaffke, *Toymaking with Children* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1988). Combines experience and conversations with experienced Waldorf kindergarten teachers such as Elizabeth Moore Haas of Switzerland, Freya Jaffke of Germany, Margret Meyerkort of England, and Bronja Zahlingen of Austria.
- 6 E. Hyun, *Making Sense of Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practice (DCAP) in Early Childhood Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

- 7 S. Smilansky, "Sociodramatic Play: Its Relevance to Behavior and Achievement in School," *Children's Play and Learning*, eds. E. Klugman and S. Smilansky (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), p. 19.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 10 *Der Spiegel* (Nr. 20, 1977): pp. 89-90.
- 11 High/Scope Summary. Different effects from different preschool models: High/Scope preschool curriculum comparison study. Drawn from works by L.J. Schweinhard and D.P. Weidart, et al, from <http://www.highscope.org/Research/curriccomp.htm>.
- 12 R.A. Marcon, "Moving Up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success," in *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2002).
- 13 S. Ohanian, *What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 11.
- 14 J. Steinberg, "Student Failure Causes States to Retool Testing," *New York Times* (December 22, 2000), cited in Ohanian, *What Happened to Recess*, pp. 11-12.
- 15 V. Strauss, "U.S. to Review Head Start Program," *Washington Post* (January 17, 2003): A01.