

## RESTORING PLAYFUL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS\*

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Throughout history great philosophers and scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian, Luther, Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel assigned great value to children's play and spoke and wrote for its incorporation into education and family life. Views of these earlier philosophers helped shape those of early twentieth century scholars, focusing on the values of educating the whole child, respecting individual differences, favoring amusement over compulsion, play as a guiding principle, physical experience with objects and ideas, and balance between play and work in child rearing and education, beginning in infancy. Their keen intellectual tools of observation, inquiry, reflection, and their grasp of history led to principles of child development much like those emerging from formal research of the early twentieth century. Throughout history eminent scholars recognized the multiple values of play for learning, development, and health. They believed that play should be included in children's everyday lives, integrated play into school curricula, and held that learning should be pleasant and playful.

Native Americans, early settlers, even slave children and the children of the Great Depression had their times for play and enjoyed free access to challenging outdoor grounds for play – wilderness, streams, fields, barnyards, vacant lands, etc. – in their own special ways, the ultimate playgrounds. Play was free, self-chosen, and characterized by creation, imagination, and intense physical and emotional involvement and extended families tutored their children in a tapestry of play and work.

A century ago reformers in churches, business, government, charitable organizations, even a president (Theodore Roosevelt), saw the ravages of depriving children of play in major cities and play venues and formed a child-saving movement consisting of multiple sub-movements: the play and playgrounds movement, college and high school training for play leaders, the nature study movement, the school gardens movement, the summer camps movement, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the children's zoo movement, and the children's museum movement. Tens of thousands of abandoned children from the streets and cities were shipped by orphan trains to live and change lives with farm families in practically every state. These children prevailed and became leaders who helped shape the nation.

Almost a century ago, educators were listening to earlier philosophers such as Froebel and later scholars – Hall, Blow, Spencer, Wheelock, Gesell, Putnam, Thorndike, James, and Dewey- resulting in America's child study institutes, contributing to professional

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organizations promoting play and early scholarly research on play. The training in these institutes and organizations emphasized the whole child, the full range of children's developmental attributes, individual differences, child observation and study, and the values of free play. America's best child development programs for preschool children honored such values to the present time but many contemporary early childhood programs, especially those in poverty areas, lack teacher skills and program resources, and employ extended such questionable options as television entertainment and unguided play in overcrowded, poorly equipped physical facilities.

Dovetailing with the "new psychology," child study institutes, and the play movement, early nursery schools were aptly named "play schools" for both the indoor and outdoor spaces were designed and used for a broad range of free and assisted spontaneous play. The schools emphasized uniting the spontaneous play of children with societal demands for education, including environmental and nature studies. Now, we revisit this same refrain clarified by an educator/writer in 1914:

*"The time has come when men are beginning to realize that the stifling of the child's developing enthusiasms in life through a back-warping, chest cramping, nerve-breaking, mind-deadening, desk and schoolroom program of "studies" is as cruel as the Spanish Inquisition."*(Hetherington, 1914)

Pioneering play schools such as the Ruggles Street Nursery School, the Horace Mann School, and child study centers at Cornell, Iowa, Yale, Teacher's College, Fels, Merrill-Palmer, and Minnesota, stood in sharp contrast to currently prevalent industrial-type models, standardized curricula, and diminution or deprivation of traditional play and access to outdoor grounds for play. In a few brief decades a perfect storm of events undermined centuries of hard-learned lessons about the care and education of children and the importance of play for a healthy childhood and a competent adulthood. This resulted in a changing culture of childhood and disregard for free, active, spontaneous play and playful learning. The causes were multiple and the consequences were profound.

### Play Deprivation: Causes and Consequences

Growing affluence following World War II and the technology revolution shaped a new ethic of child rearing and education. Many rejected the wisdom of the ages and a century of research in child development as mere tradition and guesswork and turned to standardized business/industrial approaches to teaching and learning in the schools. High stakes testing was a prime mover, resulting in a national shell game of substituting teaching to the tests for time and research tested playful learning, integrated indoor/outdoor activity, hands-on physical experience, teaching for individual differences, child study, recess and spontaneous play, and focus on whole child learning and development.

During the past few decades, play deprivation contributed to a growing crisis, affecting children's health, fitness, learning, and development. Play deprivation contributes to obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and rickets, and can be associated with

physical and emotional illnesses, depression, violence, diminished impulse control, impulsive social behavior, and low school achievement. A few decades ago, children developed fitness and avoided obesity through extensive, daily active outdoor play and work. Now obesity and related problems have reached epidemic proportions and threaten the health, safety, school achievement, social welfare and physical fitness of most American children. Declining fitness of American children was evident a quarter century ago but was only recently widely recognized as a health crisis. For example, results of administering the Cooper Fitness Test to 2.5 Texas public school children in 2008 resulted in only 30 per cent of third grade children passing, and scores declined every grade level with only 9 per cent of boys and 21 percent of twelfth grade girls passing. The highest scores were in upper income area schools and the lowest in low-income areas. (Enter “Texas Education Agency Fitness.”). Alarmed by this and other evidence, state legislators began drafting legislation to include recess, physical education, and nature experiences in public schools. This may have no effect on private schools or child-care programs for the young children.

Cyber Toys. The “perfect storm” of events currently changing the culture of childhood is more expansive and damaging to children than any previous crisis in America, including the plight of immigrant children of the slums in our largest cities a century ago. The causes, consequences, and solutions are more complex than those of the child-saving movement of that era. Cyber toys and games evolving from America’s love affair with sedentary, indoor play fill the void of absent parents at home, substituting for centuries-old play in neighborhoods and vacant places in cities and in wilderness, streams, fields, and barnyards in the country. Children are “forgetting” or never learn how to play centuries-old games, fail to engage in active, spontaneous group play, have little experience with the riches of nature, and are given little time for the arts and humanities.

Parental Fear. All this is complicated by the growing fears of parents resulting from constant media bombardment of children being abused, kidnapped, or injured and growing fear for their safety. A typical pattern is children arriving home from school, going immediately indoors to an empty house, raiding the refrigerator for junk food and settling down to several hours of television and play with cyber toys and faceless cyber-friends. Children are warned to avoid strangers and adults, stay indoors, and stay away from nearby parks and playgrounds. The more affluent are taken to lessons and sports when parents arrive home. Free, spontaneous play and games are increasingly rare. The health consequences from extensive sedentary activity coupled with poor diets - obesity, diabetes, rickets, and cardiovascular disease – are sufficient reasons to reverse this pattern. The promising approaches are extensive including countering media violence and sedentary play with parent education, health and safety instruction at school, and providing community parks, playgrounds, and trained play leaders when schools are not in session.

High Stakes Testing. The coup-de-grace for free play was the No Child Left Behind Act and high stakes testing. The evidence against this failing practice is extensively documented by research. Following the pattern of parents, schools diminish or delete recess and some no longer build playgrounds because of alleged fear of injuries and

lawsuits. Traditional contact games such as chase and dodge ball are prohibited, and some schools prohibit running on the playground or engaging in games that include touching others. In reality, fear of lawsuits may be an escape from the “frivolous activity” of play, and “fun” would detract from time for teaching to tests. The public schools in Texas, for example, are protected from playground injury lawsuits by tort immunity, but many of these schools are reducing recess, physical education, and time for the arts to free time for test preparation. The consequences include obesity and related diseases, contributing to a nation of physically unfit children who fail to develop the cognitive and motor skills essential to protecting themselves from injuries during active, skinned knee play on challenging outdoor built and natural play environments.

Safety Standards and Lawsuits. The growth of lawsuits paralleled the development of state and national safety standards, regulations, and guidelines for playgrounds and child care facilities. These are perpetually expanding, increasingly inconsistent with evidence about injuries, lack coordination across standards, complicate and even preclude the use of beneficial materials and equipment and add fuel for lawsuits which typically require two to four years to resolve. A single, reliable standard for specific elements, e.g., classroom and playground equipment, and tort reform are sorely needed.

Poverty. Evidence has accumulated for decades that income is the best predictor of success and failure in school. Family income is a consistent predictor of grades, standardized test scores, educational attainment, and obesity and fitness levels. The gaps are seen in preschool and grow over time. Poverty area schools fail to meet standard testing requirements, suffer punitive measures, and theirs are the schools branded failure or non-conforming, and closed – as though the building is to blame. The poor suffer most from the brain dead view that the only worthwhile learning is that of classrooms full of bleary-eyed children memorizing trivia for tests. These are the children increasingly restrained from recess, joy of learning, hands-on explorations, integrated indoor/outdoor activities, creative and imaginative activities, artistic activities, and the many brain building out-of-school experiences taken for granted by affluent parents who choose them. Now pressures increase for extending such practices down to kindergarten, Head Start, and early child development programs. Providing the sensible, valid, reliable assessment needed for diagnostic teaching and assessing developmental levels and progress is not the issue here.

The wisdom of the ages, the research of the past century, and the extensive experience of the most successful early childhood programs tell us enough to abandon or radically modify the present industrial models for standardizing products. It is not such programs that we need but highly imaginative programs that value *integrated, balanced programs* of play, work, arts, exploration, creativity, imagination, academics, and integrated indoor and outdoor learning in both natural and built settings, Evidence about the benefits of nature experiences and engaging in free outdoor play in playgrounds is similar - both pointing to multiple developmental benefits. Research is needed to clarify the relative contributions to learning and development resulting from the *activity* (play) and the *environment* – indoor and outdoor natural and built play and learning environments. Environments. Evidence is clear and essentially uncontested that children need regular

physical activity as an antidote for obesity and poor fitness, and free, spontaneous play for health, learning and development.

Building on Success. We can look to many contemporary early childhood programs or models for guidelines. These include Head Start, High Scope, Bank Street, Vygotskian models, Montessori programs, Reggio Emilia programs, NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines, and Harlem Children's Zone. The needs include identifying the most promising practices, mining existing research, and keeping abreast of the growing body of scholarly evidence from many disciplines. For example, neuroscientists around the developing world are exploring the relatively untapped reservoirs of the brains of both animals and humans to bring greater clarity about how and what children can and should learn at all developmental levels. False and premature claims for early childhood education and child development abound yet clarity is slowly emerging. Organizations promoting play are expanding at an unprecedented rate and providing evidence for play to an ever-broadening audience. Medical researchers are increasingly studying issues related to playful learning and the healthy development of children, and professional organizations promoting the value of play are bringing new talent from various disciplines into the search for answers to the crisis in children's play and early childhood education.

We must make certain messages accessible and clear to parents, educators and politicians. Play builds brains. Play, work, and learning are inextricably interrelated. Assessment must be valid and reliable and appropriate for diagnostic teaching/learning across individual differences of children. The teaching and learning of young children should be pleasant and playful, and the whole child the object of our teaching. The school experiences of young children in poverty areas must involve parents and provide many of the learning experiences, play opportunities and settings in school and neighborhood, and provisions for health normally provided by more affluent parents. All children, especially the children of the poor, need quality early childhood programs. The investment of time and resources required to extend and maintain the practices of our best early childhood programs to all children is extensive and will require massive, coordinated action by many organizations.

