

CLINICAL EDITOR COMMENT

The author presents an argument for the need for free play with children in all societies, especially western society. He discusses the emotional, cognitive and social benefits of free play and the concerns with the lack of play in the lives of modern day children. He argues that play therapists, as play/child experts have a mandate to advocate for play in various settings.

No Time or Place for Child's Play

By David A. Crenshaw PhD, ABPP, RPT-S

When I imagine childhood at its best moments, I picture a group of children playing freely and romping at the seashore. They are making joyful sounds, running with abandonment into the water and then quickly retreating back to shore, only to race once again into the water to meet the relentless return of the waves. When they tire, they turn their attention to building castles in the sand.

The Observer (<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/>) (May 6, 2007) featured an article by Vanessa Thorpe called, No Time to Play at Flagship School. She reported the most expensive state school in Britain, the Thomas Deacon City Academy in Peterborough, was scheduled to open without a playground. A school official explained that, by providing no outside play space, it would avoid the risk of uncontrollable children running around during the break time.

In the US, many parents have in their relentless pursuit of obtaining every possible competitive advantage for their children have over-scheduled them nearly every day. This parental practice includes scheduling for their children after school activities such as tennis, swim team, piano lessons, chess practice or Karate classes or some other form of "personal development" or "productive activity." This frenetic activity is sometimes known as "parenting by resume." From preschool onward the concern seems to focus on building resume credits that position children for entrance to the best private schools and colleges. Free play with friends in the neighborhood is a rare treat for privileged children growing up today. The restriction of free play time, however, is not limited to children

from affluent families. All children suffer. An article in the New York Times by Dirk Johnson (April 7, 1998) called, Putting an End to Child's Play, reported the Atlanta Public Schools, like many school districts in the USA had eliminated recess in elementary schools, they viewed it as a "waste" of time.

Compelling Benefits of Free Play

Howard P. Chudacoff's (2007) new book, Children at play: An American history, lamented the increasing intrusion of parents into the play of their children. Free play stimulates the imagination of children, allows for unstructured interaction between children that builds important social skills, such as taking turns, sharing, negotiating, compromising, and to experience mutual enjoyment from spontaneous playful activities. Dr. Chudacoff, a history professor at Brown University, also expressed concern about the commercialization of toys that limit the pretend and imaginative play potential. He observed that the toy industry has largely become a spin-off of the television and film industry based on licensing deals with major toy manufacturers. He explained that these toys come with their prepackaged back story thus limiting the playful, creative potential of such media promoted products. What is lost if children don't have a time and a place for free play? A large body of child development and early education research has validated the role of play in cognitive development. Indeed, the creation of imaginary situations, characters, and events lays the foundation for abstract thinking (Pellegrini & Smith, 2006; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek,

2006). Free play contributes to socio-emotional development by facilitating affective growth marked by practice in understanding, expressing and controlling emotional expression and sharing emotionally meaningful experiences with playmates.

Impinging Cultural Forces

While these important benefits of play are well known, the play of children has been co-opted by well meaning adults, parents and educators who wish to maximize the growth and productivity benefits by scheduling to the brim the time that used to be available for free play. What is lost is too precious to forego. When lessons from the high performance culture of the adult corporate world are applied to the play of children, the value of play for play's sake is lost. If there is no time and place for such experiences it is a harrowing loss for children. Not one single moment of missed childhood in the form of wonder, imaginative exploration, or fantasy adventure can ever be recaptured.

Plato and Aristotle both viewed wonder as the basis of all thought. A sense of wonder and mystery is one of the special gifts of childhood that sadly is lost all too quickly when children make the transition to adulthood. When adults take over the play time of children they fail to recognize the vast differences in the world of childhood versus adulthood. Goethe, the German philosopher and poet, noted that individuals often see in the world around them what they carry in their hearts. What children carry in their hearts and what they see in the world is often quite different from what adults carry in their hearts and what they see in their world.

Play is the natural language of young children, the younger the child the more this is true. Wittgenstein (1971) said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (p.117). If we limit children's play, we limit their language, and we limit their world. Freud expressed a similar view when he claimed: "Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather re-arranges the things of the world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real." (Freud, 1908, p.143)

Natural Healing Properties of Play

One of the amazing qualities of the imaginative play of children is the child's spontaneous and natural use of the play to work out emotional distress. If for example, a teacher reprimands a child, that same child might set up a pretend school at the end of the day, perhaps enlisting the help of a sibling or friend, then assume the role of the teacher and ream another child out. The child typically feels better and moves on to a new scenario or another form of play.

Play therapists capitalize on these natural healing powers of play to address emotional issues that go beyond the stress of a day but rather represent ongoing conflicts or experiences with more complex emotional underpinnings or in some cases grief or trauma events in the child's life. When children are constrained in their opportunities to engage in free play, it constricts a healthy and natural outlet for resolving conflict and relieving stress. In addition, children in the course of their imaginative play often find solutions as they play out various alternatives; they spontaneously engage in creative problem

solving. This happens usually when no direction or structure is offered by adults.

It is fascinating as Beverly James (1989) pointed out that the traumatized child doesn't engage in free play. She described these children as "stuck" or "frozen." Play therapists have to teach these children that it is okay to play. They may not feel the freedom to play if their father is in jail or if there has been a sudden death in the family. Play for these children is stiff, constrained, lacking joy and spontaneity, and it doesn't relieve anxiety the way the play of non-traumatized children does.

What Play Therapists Can Do

Children who don't know how to play due to extreme constriction as a result of anxiety or children who can't play due to traumatizing conditions in their life can be taught to play. They can be taught by the empathic play therapist who eases them gradually into playful expression that allows them to discover how liberating free play can be. It releases them from the bondage created by their extreme anxiety or the trauma events of their lives.

Perhaps the most important contribution the play therapist can make, given the emphasis on achievement at any cost in our highly competitive, driven culture, is to educate the teachers, parents, and school administrators in our respective corners of the world. In a culture that increasingly believes there is no time or place for children to freely play, we need to help parents, educators, and policy makers understand that the increasing restrictions on the spontaneous, imaginative play of children is akin to "theft of childhood."

Play therapists should be among the strongest advocates of the healing, educational, emotional, and social values of the self-initiated, unstructured play of children. We need to help parents understand that far from being a waste of time, there is nothing more magical than simply joining children in play, when they invite us in, to take time to learn about their world of creative fantasy and imagination, to play a role assigned by them, or to just quietly but attentively listen and watch as they create, modify, and communicate their world in the language they find most natural, the language of play. The song of the soul of a child is a melody composed of wonder and mystery, and the dance of a child's soul is playfulness. Before the music of the child's soul stops, we should advise adults to learn to dance—the dance of playfulness.

References

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