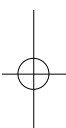


New Research on the Power of Play

Susan Howard

Early Childhood Educational Reform in the Past Twenty-Five Years



In 2003, Sharna Olfman, clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychology at Point Park College in Pittsburgh, published *All Work and No Play...How Educational Reforms Are Harming Our Preschoolers*.¹ Olfman describes the dramatic reform in education and in the lives of children that has taken place in North America in recent decades: “Its guiding mantra is ‘Standards, Accountability, Testing, and Technology,’” she writes.

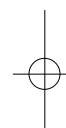
This wave of reform began with the publication in 1983 of “A Nation at Risk,” a report issued by President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence. The Commission concluded that “if only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system.”² The U.S. embarked upon “standards-based education,” including the introduction of early academic learning, mediated experiences (computer-based instruction), and high-stakes testing.

Later, after the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the “accountability” movement intensified, with high-stakes testing for four-year-olds introduced in Head Start preschool programs and with increasing pressures for academic learning in early childhood education in general.

An example of the dramatic paradigm shift for early childhood education is the legislation

proposed by the New York State Education Department’s Early Education and Reading Initiatives Office in 2005,³ designed to replace an earlier core policy, called “Supporting Young Children and Their Families,” adopted in 1992.

The earlier policy included such elements as safe and nurturing environments, curricula based on teacher observations and developmentally appropriate practices, parent participation, and small groups. The new proposed legislation has quite a different quality, as indicated by its name: “Policy Statement on Early Education for Student Achievement in a Global Community.” Stating that “much has changed” since 1992 and that “new research compels us to review and update our policy,” the proposed reform for early education includes the following tenets:

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- Instruction that is “dense and direct,” in order to activate the areas of the brain responsible for reading, language, and social/emotional skills
 - Statewide pre-kindergarten for three- and four-year-olds, with mandatory full-day kindergartens to “strengthen educational beginnings”
 - Compulsory school entrance age lowered to age five
 - Assessment protocols that inform instruction and “improve alignment” among standards, curriculum assessment, and instruction
 - Use of “standards-based commercial products” instead of locally or regionally designed curricula to ensure a comprehensive and unified approach to education

1. Olfman 2003.

2. Cited in Kane, J. *Education, Information and Transformation: Essays on Learning and Thinking*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999.

3. www.emsc.nysed.gov/earlychild/global/cover/html.

This legislation has not (yet) been adopted, but nonetheless expresses the current direction of public school educational reform.

The Disappearance of Play

As a result of such reforms, with changes in the dynamics of family life, early childhood experience in North America today is dramatically different from that of a decade ago. One aspect of this dramatic change has to do with children's play. Recognized by Waldorf educators as an absolutely essential early developmental foundation for later learning and health, children's play has been disappearing from North American public schools, kindergartens, neighborhoods, and homes. Replaced by academic and technological instruction in the classroom, organized after-school activities, and computer activity and mediated entertainment at home, free imaginative play, both indoors and outdoors in nature, is disappearing.⁴

A recent clinical report in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), outlines factors that have contributed to the decline of play for children whose parents have "abundant available resources."⁵ (A future study will focus on children of poverty and in the working class.) Some of the major factors include:

- Changing family dynamics. Fewer multi-generational households and more families with a single head of household or two working parents mean that more children are in child-care and formal settings during the day and in organized activities after school.⁶
- The "professionalization of parenthood." Standards of efficiency and productivity in the parents' workplaces often transfer to their childrearing practices and lead to enrolling children in structured out-of-home activities rather than providing opportunities for play.

4. See Louv, Richard. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (sometimes referred to as "No Child Left Inside"). Algonquin 2006.

5. Ginsburg 2007.

6. See the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) "Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development," for the effects of institutional care of young children in later school years, published in the March-April 2007 issue of *Child Development*.

- Pressure on parents to "build a resumé" for their child beginning in the early years, to ensure later admission to selective schools and colleges as the pathway to success in later life. Very young children begin to be "packaged" for admission to selective preschools, and parents are pressured to purchase heavily marketed "enrichment tools" and programs.
- The national trend toward focusing on academic fundamentals (as described earlier in this article) and the resulting prioritization of homework completion and extension of academics at the expense of organized play, free play, and physical activity
- Passive entertainment through the media despite evidence of its harmful effects
- Increasing parental concerns regarding the safety of children outside the home and fears of violence or environmental dangers. These have led to a decrease in outdoor play and a resulting lack of connection to the natural world.

The consequences for the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of today's children are a source of great concern. The report cites increases in stress, obesity, anxiety and depression, perfectionism, overly critical self-evaluation, school avoidance, and other mental health issues in children, adolescents, and college-aged students.

The Well-Being of Children

A study published this year by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, surveyed child well-being in twenty-one nations.⁷ Like the AAP study, the UNICEF document focuses on the lives of children in economically advantaged situations, in the wealthy nations of the industrialized world. The UNICEF "Report Card 7" attempts to measure and compare childhood well-being in six areas: material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviors and risks, and subjective well-being.

7. UNICEF 2007.

The United States ranked in the bottom third of all indicators, and ranked overall at the very bottom of the list of mostly European countries—as did the United Kingdom. In the areas of family and peer relationships, behaviors and risks, and health and safety, the U.S. ranked twentieth or twenty-first out of the twenty-one countries. If, as the UNICEF report asserts, “the true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children,” then American educational reforms and societal changes of the past twenty years have not been successful in maintaining U.S. primacy on the world stage. More importantly, perhaps, American children are not being well served by current educational and societal trends. Educational reforms motivated by materialism, consumerism, and competition do not guarantee the soul-spiritual or even the physical well-being of children. Instead, a more fully human approach is called for.

Recommendations for Health: The Benefits of Play

The AAP report advocates the promotion of community-based, school-based, and family-based strategies to address the concerns described above. It reminds its readers that play has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child⁸ and focuses on the benefits of play in supporting physical and mental health and the development of character traits that support learning.

The report cites the importance of play for the development of imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. “[P]lay helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges. Undirected play allows children to learn to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills.”⁹

The report also cites the importance of active play—in contrast to passive media entertainment or academic desk work—as an important factor in resolving the current epidemic in North America of childhood obesity.

Another finding of the report has to do with the role of creative play in establishing healthy communication and nurturing bonds between parents and children. Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse their children’s world learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle, nurturing guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing their parents an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of their perspectives.

The AAP Committee members made a number of recommendations to its member pediatricians, including the following:

- Promote free play as a healthy, essential part of childhood and educate families regarding the protective assets and increased resiliency developed through free play
- Recommend that all children are afforded ample, unscheduled, independent, non-screen time to be creative, to reflect, and to decompress
- Emphasize the benefits of “true toys” such as blocks and dolls, with which children use their imagination fully, over passive toys that require limited imagination
- Reinforce the importance of early education programs that offer more than “academic preparedness,” attending to the social and emotional developmental needs of children
- Support academic schedules based on children’s unique needs rather than on competitive community standards
- Remind parents that the most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare their children for success arise not from academic or extra-curricular commitments but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modeling, and guidance

A Call to Action from the Alliance for Childhood

In October 2006, the Alliance for Childhood released a “Call to Action on the Education of Young Children,”¹⁰ signed by hundreds of leading

8. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.

9. Elkind 2001 and Struthers 2000.

10. <http://www.allianceforchildhood.org>.

educators, physicians, and other experts, calling for a reversal of educational policies that eliminate free, creative play. “We are deeply concerned that current trends in early education, fueled by political pressure, are leading to an emphasis on unproven methods of academic instruction and unreliable standardized testing that can undermine learning and damage young children’s healthy development.” Signers include Harvard professors Howard Gardner and Kathleen McCartney, pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, authors Stanley Greenspan, Jonathan Kozol, Daniel Goleman, and Alliance president Joan Almon, among others. The Alliance is currently sponsoring a number of projects intended to stimulate healthy children’s play in public environments such as city parks, children’s museums, and schools.

The “Best” Schools

In *The Best Schools: How Human Development Research Should Inform Educational Practice*, Thomas Armstrong argues for a paradigm shift in our approach to educational reform, from what he calls “Academic Achievement Discourse” to a paradigm of “Human Development Discourse.” He extols the virtues of free, creative play as the “single best way” to meet the developmental needs of young children. “It may be that virtually every significant contribution to culture originally stemmed from a playful act that had its seeds in childhood. This extraordinary feature of play, coupled with its social, emotional, physical, and cognitive benefits, makes play the central developmental activity around which all other early childhood education activities must revolve.”¹¹

Armstrong cites Waldorf education as an example of such developmentally appropriate practice because of its emphasis on “artistic development, cross-cultural enrichment, and deep regard for the imaginative and creative worlds of children.”

As this new wave of research and educational developmental thought illuminates the necessity of cultivating essential human qualities and capacities rather than focusing merely on academic skills and competitive test scores, Waldorf

education has much to offer. As Waldorf educators, we are challenged to deepen our own understanding of the role of creative play as the primary source of learning and development in the early years and to renew our efforts to advocate for play and the protection of childhood as the basis for human culture in the future.

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11. Armstrong 2006.