

The Importance of Free Play for Kids

Put a bunch of kids together in a room, ground or any space with or without toys and they will find ways to entertain themselves. They might prance around, run and catch, jump for no reason or come up with a hopping game that other kids slowly participate in. Child development experts call these kinds of spontaneous, child-directed activities “free play.”

There used to be a time when free play was applicable to all kids and most kids indulged in free play almost every day of their lives. It could be a group of kids playing a sport or just hanging about playing a game that has no name, but we very often saw kids doing things - meeting, interacting, moving, laughing, thinking - that was not structured or curated. In fact, this was a big part of every child's life as they grew up even up until a decade ago.

But times have not-so-slowly changed. Over the last 15-20 years technology has become more prevalent, cities have become more crowded, time has become a very limited resource (for adults and kids alike) and all this have squeezed unmonitored free play out of children's lives. We have no replaced this time of free play with organised extra curricular activities like sport coaching, music classes, art lessons and more.

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~~In moderation, organized extracurricular activities instill skills and competence in kids, boost their confidence, and give parents both time to work and peace of mind that their children are being looked after. And this is important because parents are more worried than ever about the safety of their kids today. In fact, the radius of free movement for a child has drastically reduced compared the years and generations before.~~

But child-directed play is essential to children's emotional and intellectual development. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics 2007 report, "some play must remain entirely child driven, with parents either not present or as passive observers, because play builds some of the individual assets children need to develop and remain resilient."

Executive Function (EF) is a set of mental skills that help a child get things done. These skills are controlled by an area of the brain called the frontal lobe. EF is responsible for the following 5 skills -

1. Paying attention
2. Organising and planning
3. Initiating tasks and staying focussed
4. Regulating emotions
5. Self-monitoring

A [2014 study](#) from University of Colorado found that children between six and seven who engaged in less-structured activities like imaginative role-playing, reading for pleasure, playing board games or self-curated sports demonstrated greater "executive function". Unsurprisingly, kids who spent most of their time on structured activities demonstrated lesser EF.

So let kids be kids. Give them the time, space and freedom to do things, make mistakes and figure things out for themselves. After all that's what they are going to be doing for the rest of their lives. If getting them ready for the real world is what you're after, free play does that better than most other things.

Reference

Less-structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning: Jane E. Barker (1*), Andrei D. Semenov (1), Laura Michaelson (1), Lindsay S. Provan (1), Hannah R. Snyder (2) and Yuko Munakata (1)

1 - Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

2 - Department of Psychology, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA