

ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Opinions

Children's play is critical for healthy development

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Children in the Southwestern Alaska village of Hooper Bay play on Thursday, Aug. 11, 2016. (Lisa Demer / Alaska Dispatch News)

Some doctors are starting to write a very different kind of prescription for their young patients — a strong recommendation to “play every day.”

While this may sound curious or frivolous to some, research shows that unstructured play is an essential building block for healthy child development. Unfortunately, children today have fewer opportunities to play and grow in healthy ways, which negatively affects their ability to decrease stress, overcome adverse childhood experiences, learn positive social behaviors and develop higher-level reasoning skills. The lack of play affects not only children and families, but also schools, communities and society.

Dr. Michael Yogman, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is a leading pediatrician studying the benefits of play. He recently authored “The Power of Play,” published by the American Academy of Pediatrics. On Feb. 21, from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage, Dr. Yogman will lead a community panel on the importance of physical activity and play for our youth and community health.

Earlier that day, hundreds of Alaska students will participate in a statewide event called PLAAY (Positive Leadership for Active Alaska Youth) Day, with children completing organized physical activity all at the same time in schools. This event helps kids get closer to the recommended 60 minutes of daily activity. Our Department of Health and Social Services and its Play Every Day campaign support the school event and community panel and encourage children to play and grow up healthy.

What has led to the loss of play? This generation faces a multitude of barriers that limit unstructured, child-directed play. An increasing societal emphasis on academic results has shifted the focus during early learning and preschool from social emotional skills to building math and reading skills. More families have both parents working or just one parent raising a child. Finding quality child care adds stress to families. For some, playgrounds, parks and neighborhoods don’t feel safe enough for children in today’s world. Other families, with the best intentions, enrich but inadvertently over-schedule their children’s time with organized activities such as team sports or lessons. There is also no denying that increased screen time and social media interaction has replaced outdoor play.

Children’s playtime decreased by 25 percent between 1981 and 1997, according to Dr. Yogman. Children ages 3–11 have lost 12 hours per week of free time.

Dr. Yogman also describes the crucial role that different types of play have on a child’s development. Child-led play and exploration builds a child’s ability to function effectively in our increasingly complex world. It does this from the appearance of a baby’s first smiles and simple reciprocal games like peek-a-boo to a child’s exploration of objects and more sophisticated interactions with caregivers and other children.

Through play, children learn how to plan and carry out tasks, negotiate turn-taking and interact with others. Play helps build communication skills that blossom from uncontrollable crying to whining to using words to ask for help.

Play guided by nurturing adults is also important. When an adult encourages and guides a child in play, a process called scaffolding allows children to increase learning beyond what they have already mastered by “pushing the envelope.” Learning is more effective and encourages curiosity when guidance takes cues from the child and allows for exploration. This kind of play and the sharing of the magic of childhood between parents and children help the whole family. Not only does it assist children in building important skills and resilience in the face of stress, it also brings joy to parents.

If we support our children to play every day, we can all help build stronger, smarter, more resilient and happier kids, who grow into successful productive adults.

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