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Imaginations More Active Despite Less Play Time, Study Shows



Valerie Rodriguez, left, lies still as a classmate outlines her body during playtime earlier this year at a Head Start program at the George Miller Children's Center in Richmond, Calif.
—Ramin Rahimian for Education Week-File

By Sarah D. Sparks

Students today may have less time for free play, but new research suggests their imaginations have actually sharpened compared with children two decades ago.

In an analysis published in May 2011 in the *Creativity Research Journal* and **posted online last month**, researchers from Case Western University in Cleveland found elementary school children in 2008 were significantly more imaginative and took greater comfort in playing make-believe than their counterparts in 1985 despite having less time either during or after school for free play.

"We did think everything was going to get worse, because if play time is going down, you'd think children wouldn't be able to engage in play as well as they used to," said Sandra W. Russ, a professor of psychology, who co-authored the study with Case Western doctoral student Jessica A. Dillon.

"We knew from talking with children that they didn't play with toys as much as they used to. So we were surprised by the finding, and we think it's important."

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to. So we were surprised by the finding, and we think it's important.

Measuring Play

Ms. Russ has been analyzing students' play practices at middle- and working-class elementary schools for 23 years, using a measure called the Affect in Play Scale. Nearly 900 children ages 6 to 10 have been videotaped for five minutes each as they talked while playing with three blocks and two hand-puppets. Researchers later scored each video for the child's imagination, emotional expression, actions, and storytelling.

"We look at, can the child use the blocks to be different things—cars, a building, beads on a necklace?" she explained. "We look at different play elements in the story: How novel is it? Is the child engaged in it, enjoying it?"

The Case Western researchers found that across 14 studies spanning 23 years, children showed no difference in the organization or emotional engagement of their play or storytelling. But there was a marked increase, on a one-to-five scale, in the quality of imagination they displayed during the sessions.

Children who rate highly in imaginative and emotional play are not necessarily more intelligent than other children, Ms. Russ said, but they do show better coping skills, creativity, and problem solving than students who rate low on the play scale.

Shrinking Free Time

The findings may give a breath of relief to educators concerned that playtime is shrinking for the nation's students, just as research shows the cognitive and social benefits of children's make-believe. According to 2008 data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the most recent available, public school students have on average 1.7 hours of recess time each week, but 7 to 10 percent of schools have no recess at all in particular grades.

On average, American children have eight fewer hours of unstructured playtime after school each week than they did 25 years ago, according to research by David Elkind, a professor emeritus of child development at Tufts University in Medford, Mass. Mr. Elkind attributes a "loss of the culture of childhood" to increasing parent concerns over child safety during free time and a rise in academic focus for both school time and extracurricular activities, leading to more structured, scheduled play.

Moreover, the American Academy of Pediatrics **has found** that students from low socioeconomic-level backgrounds have disproportionately less time for unstructured free play, because they are more likely to face cuts to school recess time, and unsafe parks and playgrounds to use after school. Play, for the researchers' purposes, can include play indoors or outside with toys, but does not include video game play or sports or other structured activities.


But Ms. Russ believes that, as children's playtime is restricted, they may be finding ways to "sneak in" pretend play, and that schools forced to do away with recess or art frequently try to incorporate more imaginative tasks into other parts of the curriculum.


"Children are resilient," she said. "It's possible they are playing more than we think they are, that they're squeezing it in somewhere during the day, at night, when they're not being taken to sports or dancing class."

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a psychology professor and play researcher at Temple University in Philadelphia, agreed that students will find ways to play even in the most structured or limiting environments.


"The very fact that animals play and humans play tells you something; there must be


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some evolutionary benefit here," Ms. Hirsh-Pasek said. "You can't have something that prevalent in a species that doesn't have a use. I think that use comes out in social skills, inhibiting bad responses, and promoting good responses, talking about that which can and cannot be seen."

Play as Safety Valve

However, while imagination can be developed via other methods, children's emotional development may be taking a bigger hit from limits on playtime, the Case Western researchers found.

Children in the study showed no change in positive emotions and enjoyment during the play sessions, but over the years they became much less likely to show negative emotion during play. That might seem like a benefit—children are becoming happier in their play—but Ms. Russ finds it troubling that children are less likely to use play as a safety valve for aggression, depression and other bad feelings.

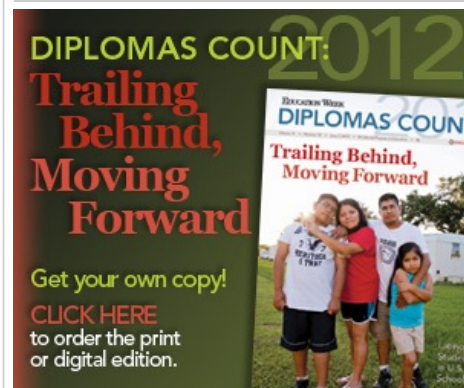
"This may be where the lack of time to play may be starting to hurt," Ms. Russ said. "Play is safe; it's pretend, and if they express negative emotions, it's OK. Children use play to process negative emotion, and if they don't have as much time to play, they don't have many other places where they can do it. So as a clinical psychologist, that finding concerns me."

John J. Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School in Cambridge, Mass., called play "vital, not only for students' happiness but their ability to take in new information and learn about failure."

Bringing Back Play

After more than a decade of reductions in recess time, the pendulum is just beginning to swing back toward providing more time for students to play, both at home and at school.

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"Play is active, engaged, and meaningful learning, and we know that's absolutely not a waste of time," Ms. Hirsh-Pasek said. "I think we have to begin to ask, if the goal is about learning, how do we create learning environments that allow kids to take the playful lead?"

In Illinois, for example, state Sen. Kimberly Lightford has proposed legislation to require all K-5 schools to provide at least 20 minutes of recess, including "free and structured play" per day, and to recommend the same for all grades above that. By contrast, many Chicago public schools had not had recess for decades, until the district's extended-day plan implemented this year required all primary schools to offer recess starting next year. That bill, SB 636, passed the state Senate on May 10, but a spokesperson from Sen. Lightford's office said it won't be taken up by the state House until fall.

Individual schools are trying to integrate more play as well. The Blue School, an independent school in the Manhattan borough of New York that was founded by the performance art troupe the Blue Man Group, uses a project-based curriculum to allow students as much free rein in learning as possible. The school, which serves 200 students from preschool through 3rd grade, evolved out of a parent-run play group and tries to keep to its roots, according to Reneé Rolleri, a co-founder and the president of the school's board.

For example, one class of 4-year-olds used the school's playground of giant foam shapes to create an "animal training center." While the project incorporated considerable free play, the children also researched the whales, dolphins and lions they would pretend to train, designed and built costumes, and interviewed guests associated with a real wildlife conservation center.

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"When teachers have the freedom and ability to watch and listen to the students and integrate content into projects the students care about," Ms. Rolleri said, "you have this incredible group of deeply engaged students who have ownership of what they are learning."

Blending free play and formal academics can be a delicate balance, though. [Research by H. Lindsey Russo](#), an assistant professor at the State University of New York New Paltz school of education and the curriculum director at Blue School, shows preschool-age children made no distinction between work and play if they were having fun, but they were acutely sensitive to being allowed to do things independently. "Even when an activity was fun it immediately became 'work' if an adult intervened," she found.

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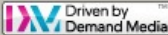
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 <p>John Bennett Score: 1</p> <p>8:40 AM on June 28, 2012</p> <p>So sad that ClydeG chose the half-empty part of the glass ... I see opportunities in these (unexpected as noted) findings. And of course, the questions raised by ClydeG should be investigated. This is a long term, well documented study that does give hope! It is another good reason to provide encouragement to Education Communities to support the formal and introduce / enhance the informal education opportunities for youngsters. As noted, the research says these "enhanced play" opportunities yield positive impact on effective learning!</p>	   Report Abuse
 <p>MRM Score: 0</p> <p>2:41 PM on June 29, 2012</p> <p>I worry that studies such at this validate practices which limit (or eliminate) students' free, unstructured time. Lots of kids already get no recess. I share ClydeG's skepticism based on my own anecdotal experiences with kids growing up in the last decade.</p>	   Report Abuse
	

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