POLICY BRIEF

MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."

Fred Rogers

PLAY IS FUNDAMENTAL TO OUR BIOLOGY

Though it may vary across cultures, play is universal. Protecting access to play is essential to supporting children's healthy development and readiness for school, the workforce, and life-long learning. Play is linked to later success in adulthood, and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a "prescription for play" at every well-child visit in the first two years of life.

PLAY IS A POWERFUL LEARNING TOOL

Encourage time for both free play and adult-child guided play, as both are important for developing essential school readiness skills in young children. These skills include math and cognition, language and literacy, and physical and motor development. Play also builds important executive functioning skills like attention, focus, and impulse control.

PLAY HAS ENORMOUS IMPACTS ON HEALTH

Allowing plenty of time for children to play - at home, in early learning settings, and in schools - is essential for their health. Research shows that providing access to nature and high-quality outdoor play areas are highly effective ways to meet active play guidelines that support health and development.

THE RESEARCH: MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

Play is fundamental to our biology - almost all mammals play. **Research shows that play is a central part of human development**, beginning in early infancy through imitation and social games with caregivers. While play is universal in humans, it is important to recognize that play may look different across individuals, families, and cultures. Play can be any activity that is freely-chosen, engaging, and fun. Researchers think play helps humans develop the social skills necessary to thrive in our complex community structures, allowing us to become flexible, creative, and adaptable throughout our lives in a changing, social world.[1]

Play is a powerful learning tool for school readiness and workforce skills. **Children learn across domains during play, whether they are engaging in math and science or language and literacy**. A study of preschool and kindergarten children found that almost half of their free play time was spent developing important early math skills such as enumeration and pattern and shape recognition. This was true regardless of family income level, race, ethnicity, or gender.[2] Further, child-centered, play-based storytelling activities significantly improve multiple dimensions of preschool children's school readiness, including narrative and other oral-language skills, emergent literacy, and social competence.[3] While free exploration and play is essential for children's development, it is also important to support time for adult-child play throughout early childhood. For example, when caregivers play alongside their child during building tasks, adults use more spatial language, which supports children's early math learning.[4]

Play - especially active, outdoor play in natural environments - has enormous impacts on health, from fine and gross motor development and physical exercise to wide-ranging mental health benefits, including reduced levels of anxiety and depression. Play within the context of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships acts as a buffer to the negative impacts of toxic stress, and is an effective way to build children's resilience to trauma.[5] Despite these benefits, young children do not have ample access to active play opportunities. Nearly half of preschool aged children are not meeting physical activity guidelines. A study of preschool-aged children in center-based childcare found that, on average, children only had 48 minutes of active play per day, falling well-short of the recommended 120+ minutes per day. Research suggests that increased time for child-led free play and outdoor play are especially effective ways to promote healthier activity levels for young children.[6]

Play also lays the foundation for lifelong learning by developing both the neural pathways and the skills that support how we learn, including attention, focus, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and impulse control. These executive function **skills gained through childhood play are linked to success later in life,**[7] and contribute to the rationale behind the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation of a "prescription for play" at every well-child visit in the first two years of life. Play is not frivolous; it nourishes the brain, enhances relationships, and builds executive functioning and the cognitive processes that enable a lifetime of learning.

RESOURCES & REFERENCES

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