



PLAY MATTERS

Giving kids the childhood they deserve

Funded by Mattel Children's Foundation



A cardboard box is much more than a cardboard box. And a playground is much more than a playground. It's a rocketship, a castle, a cupcake shop. Play is a muscle-builder, brain-expander, and friend-maker.



Making the case for play

We know that play can transform children—from sedentary to physically active, bored to mentally active, and solitary to socially active. When we make sure that our children’s lives are filled with play, we all benefit: our communities will be healthier and happier today, and our society will be stronger and more resilient tomorrow.

So why do we believe we need to promote and protect play? In recent decades, play as we know it has been slowly disappearing. When we look at how different childhood is today compared to the childhood we remember, this vanishing act becomes more apparent. Children need a variety of all types of play—from soccer to Sesame Street, and from a teddy-bear tea party to chess in the park—but for most children, play lacks balance. When children spend more than seven hours a day in front of a screen and have limited options for other kinds of play, they aren’t realizing the full range of play’s benefits: healthy bodies, resilient and creative minds, social activity, and emotional well-being.

The situation becomes more dire in low-income communities, where children too often lack access to safe places to play, many schools have cut back on recess, and societal problems like obesity and toxic stress are more deeply entrenched.

The following pages are filled with facts and information that demonstrate that play is an important component for solving some of the most pressing challenges our society—and our children—face.

Whether play is contributing to building skills children need to succeed in the 21st century or simply giving children joy, play is an essential part of childhood. Play should be everywhere, so let’s make our cities and communities child-friendly places where play can thrive everywhere.

*When we work together to make sure that every child is playing every day—in their homes, schools, and communities—we can **give all children the childhood they deserve.***

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Many of us think of play as letting the imagination run wild—while also helping kids to learn problem-solving and communication skills. Others think of kids running around outdoors, getting the physical activity that burns off energy and keeps them healthy. Still others focus on the social aspects of play—making friends, establishing rules, and gaining the social skills that will serve kids so well later in life.

What is play?

Play is all of these things. Just as a healthy diet balances proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, a balanced “play” diet should include a mix of all kinds of play. It’s make-believe, play-dough creations, and blocks. It’s running, jumping, and climbing. It’s games with friends, family, or caregivers, whether exploring playgrounds or playing hide-and-seek. It’s active minds, active bodies, and active together.



*It's when kids get a **balance** of all of these kinds of **active play** that they realize all of play's **benefits**.*

Active play benefits

ACTIVE BODIES

Play activities get children up and running around, developing motor skills and coordination, and building healthy bodies—and habits—for life.

- Physical play contributes to the development of gross motor skills, control, coordination, and strength.¹
- Healthy lifestyle habits formed through play, including physical activity, can lower the risk of becoming obese and the related risks of high blood pressure and high cholesterol, Type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, joint problems, and social and psychological problems.^{2,3}
- Analysis based on data from the National Survey of Children's Health (2007) indicate that children without neighborhood access to parks or playgrounds are 26 percent more likely to be obese and 23 percent more likely to be overweight than children with neighborhood access to parks or playgrounds.⁴

ACTIVE MINDS

Play activities help children create, explore, solve, and imagine—which helps their brain develop, builds important creative thinking and problem-solving skills, and contributes to emotional well-being. For example:

- Play may increase children's capacity to store new information, as their cognitive capacity is enhanced when they are offered drastic change in activity.⁵
- Play encourages recombining ideas, making associations, and transforming objects, helping children become more creative.⁶
- Play is associated with children developing the appreciation that problems may have numerous approaches and multiple solutions.⁷
- Small children use imaginative play and fantasy to take on their fears and create or explore a world where they can have the control they may lack in their lives. It also allows them to practice adult roles. Through this imaginative play, children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resilience they need to address future challenges.⁸

ACTIVE TOGETHER

Play brings friends together and families together, teaching kids how to interact as part of a group, resolving conflicts, and strengthening bonds.

- Play helps kids forge strong connections with one another, through learning how to share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and develop self-advocacy skills.^{9,10}
- Recent research with Foresters™, conducted by Harris Interactive, found that the more time a family spends together at a community playground, the greater its sense of family well-being in terms of strong relationships, quality health, and time spent together.¹¹

Protecting the joy of childhood

Yes, play—in all of its forms—is a powerful thing. According to a quantitative study from Insight Strategy Group, parents and children both see play as a way to relax and get rid of stress—as well as a solution to boredom.¹² And for good reason—the most important thing to remember about play is its simplest definition: play is fun.

Think back to your time spent playing on front stoops, in schoolyards, on playgrounds. That time was never wasted—it was essential. Play is the joy of childhood, the source of many of our fondest memories, the feeling we, as adults, will look to recapture throughout our lives, whether it's in our jobs or playing with our own children.



“Like, if you’re on top of the slide, you could pretend there is a warp portal at the end of the slide and when you slide all the way down you would be in a different place.”

–10-year-old boy

The disappearance of play

Society's well-being begins with a child's well-being, and play is central to a child's ability to grow into a productive adult. But Red Rover, fort building, dress up, and kickball are increasingly becoming a thing of the past as many forces conspire to make it more difficult for children to get the balance of active play they need. Today, we see a healthy balance of play falling victim to TV, video games, structured schedules, declining recess time, and a lack of access to safe play spaces.

Quite simply, children are playing less than any previous generation.

THE RESEARCH

Between 1997 and 2003 ...

Kids age 6–12 spent **24 FEWER MINUTES** *per week on free play.*¹³

Kids age 9–12 spent **54% LESS TIME** *per week outdoors.*¹⁴

Only **one in four kids** *had* **60 MINUTES**
*of physical activity or play every day.*¹⁵

The disappearance of play in our homes

Parents know the importance of play in their children's lives—more than 90 percent agree that playing outside is very important and are inspired by the creativity their children exhibit when playing. And yet some of these parents—almost 40 percent—feel that there's not enough time to play with their children and feel distracted by other responsibilities.¹⁶

Here are some troubling trends in play today:

- A study comparing mothers to their children found that 70 percent of mothers said they played outside every day when they were girls, while only 31 percent said their children did the same. And 56 percent said they played outside for three or more hours, while only 22 percent said this about their children.¹⁷
- Moreover, 85 percent said children today play outside less often than children of a few years ago. 85 percent said the top reason for this decline was time spent watching TV and playing computer/video games.¹⁸
- According to a 2009 Kaiser Family Foundation survey, between 1999 and 2009 on a typical day, young people spend more than 7 hours on screentime.¹⁹ That's almost four months out of a year!

Parents know best—and they overwhelmingly acknowledge that play presents an opportunity for their child to learn and grow, and gives the family time to relax and manage stress. It is imperative that this balance of play continues to be accessible to all children and made a priority in all homes.



The disappearance of play in our schools

Play is disappearing in schools. In fact, a 2009 study published in the journal *Pediatrics* found that 30 percent of children surveyed had little to no recess in their school day.²⁰ That's nearly one in three kids.

This is in spite of research, such as a Gallup poll revealing that elementary school principals overwhelmingly believe recess has a positive impact not only on the development of students' social skills, but also on achievement and learning in the classroom.²¹

Play helps children adjust to the school setting, and enhances their learning readiness, behavior, and problem solving skills. Schools without recess face increased incidents of classroom behavioral problems, which detract from learning time.²² Play also may increase children's capacity to store new information, as their cognitive capacity is enhanced when they are offered drastic changes in activity—switching from English to math is not enough.²³

The decline of time for recess, and other opportunities for active play in school, is happening across the board:

- A 2008 report from the Center on Education Policy found that between 2001–2002 and 2006–07, 16 percent of schools cut art and music and 20 percent cut recess.

But it disproportionately affects the 16 million American children living in poverty:

- In 2005, high-poverty elementary schools were four to five times more likely to go without recess (18–28 percent) than schools with the lowest percentage of children in poverty (4–5 percent).²⁴

These students aren't only missing out on fun opportunities to learn from each other and grow—they're missing out on chances to improve the physical and cognitive skills they need to succeed in school and in life.



The disappearance of play in our communities

Play is critical to knitting our communities together and helping children learn to work with others. As our world becomes ever more connected digitally, it is critical that we don't lose the unique community building that comes from interacting face-to-face. Play builds communities and teaches children how to interact with peers and adults, relieve stress, and cope with their surroundings.

In order to encourage play, it is critical that children have safe places to play within walking distance of where they live. Without it, the strength and resilience of the community is compromised.

- Not all children have access to play, and the availability of playspaces is far more restricted in low-income neighborhoods.²⁵
- Between 1981 and 1997, time spent playing by children age six to eight declined by 25 percent.²⁶
- Peter Gray, Ph.D. and Professor of Psychology at Boston College, observed that the loss of play for play's sake coincided with a dramatic increase in anxiety, depression, and suicide rates among teens and young adults.²⁷

Open spaces, recreation areas, and walkable neighborhoods—all opportunities for children to play—strongly influence how active people are, and they also provide fiscal benefits to municipal governments and to nearby residential property values. For example, a 2000 study in Portland, Oregon showed that the existence of a park within 1,500 feet of a home increased its sale price by between \$845 and \$2,262 (in year 2000 dollars).²⁸ When we invest in playspaces and child-focused communities, we all win. In other words, play needs to be everywhere.





The transformative power of play

The future of our society depends on its ability to foster the development of the next generation. From preventing obesity and improving mental health and wellness to building a creative and successful workforce—play lays the foundation for a skilled, healthy, resilient, and successful society and can and should be an integral part of the solution to today’s most pressing needs.



Building physical health



Poor physical health among children has both immediate and long-term effects on health and well-being, including increased risk for many types of cancer, Type 2 diabetes, asthma, and cardiovascular disease to name a few. In 2010, more than one-third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese—a three-fold increase since 1980.^{29,30} Given the current state and trends, some researchers fear that this generation will be the first to have a lower life expectancy than their parents.

*Play can help prevent obesity.*³¹

- Children living in neighborhoods without a park or playground are 26% more likely to be obese.³²
- Children who engage in at least 20 minutes of physical activity—at least 2 to 3 times a week—and engage in low levels of TV watching are almost two times less likely to be classified as overweight than children who do not engage in these minimum levels of physical activity.³³

*Play can enhance physical health by building active, healthy bodies.*³⁴

- During recess and in their free play and games, children use basic aerobic and bone-strengthening activities, such as running, hopping, skipping, and jumping, to develop movement patterns and skills. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, any episode of moderate- or vigorous-intensity physical activity, however brief, makes a difference.³⁵
- In 2005, a systematic review sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concluded that the evidence is strong that physical activity reduces fat and improves muscle, bone, and heart health in overweight and obese school-aged children.³⁶ Curbing obesity is a moral and economic imperative. It currently costs the United States as much as \$227 billion annually in medical costs and lost productivity tied to obesity and related diseases.³⁷

There are many factors that contribute to this major American health problem and therefore a complex array of solutions. Providing children a balance of play is an important part of the solution that all of us—from parents to policymakers—can do to make a dramatic impact.

Building 21st century skills



As global competition increases, it is imperative that children develop a skill-set relevant to today's workforce and are able to approach challenges with creative solutions in order to navigate our complex, ever-changing world. Critical thinking and collaboration are integral to the jobs of the future—many times more so than hard skills—and a balance of active play helps to develop these skills. In fact, a 2013 study of employers found that 93 percent agreed that “a candidates’ demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major.”³⁸ Play also indirectly contributes to children learning more hard skills in school by mitigating behavioral problems and increasing academic engagement. All of this contributes to a more holistic, productive workforce.

Play can Increase problem solving abilities:

- The American Academy of Pediatrics has reported that in an academic environment, play helps children adjust to the school setting, thereby fostering school engagement, and enhances children’s learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills.³⁹
- Play and recess may increase children’s capacity to store new information, as their cognitive capacity is enhanced when they are offered drastic change in activity.⁴⁰

Play can increase creativity:

- Play helps children become more creative as it encourages recombining ideas, making associations, and transforming objects.⁴¹
- Creativity gives us the advantage we need in today’s increasingly competitive business environment. In surveying more than 1,500 Chief Executive Officers from around the world, the IBM 2010 Global CEO Study found that chief executives believe successfully navigating an increasingly complex world will require creativity—more than rigor, management discipline, integrity, or even vision.⁴²

Play can improve classroom performance:

- 80 percent of elementary school principals report that recess has a positive impact on academic achievement.⁴³
- A 2001 systematic review of 20 studies examining the link of play and literacy concluded that play serves to improve literacy by providing settings that promote literacy activity, skills, and strategies; serving as a language experience that can build connections between oral and written modes of expression; and providing opportunities to teach and learn literacy.⁴⁴

Preparing today’s youth for successful careers tomorrow is a conversation that is taking place in board rooms, in school districts, and at every level of government. We must not forget the importance of play both as a critical component of the school day and as a key developer of the skills they will need.

Building empathy and resilience



Children are under more pressure than ever before. Almost one in four American children live in poverty, and are increasingly faced with the effects of mental illness, drug abuse, bullying, and natural and human-made disasters. Ensuring that they have the tools to navigate and relieve this stress is vital to setting them up for a successful life.

Children can use play as a way to cope with adversity and, for a child whose life has been turned upside down, play is essential for maintaining a sense of stability amid turmoil and helping to work through emotional trauma. Play is simple, familiar, and joyful—all the things that adversity is not.

Despite the increasing complexity of our world and the toxic, negative influences facing children, over the past half century, opportunities to play outdoors with other children have continually declined in the U.S. It is not a surprise that over this same period, cases of psychopathology in children and adolescents have continually increased. These include:⁴⁵

- Anxiety: a 7 percent increase between the mid 1950s and mid 2000s
- Depression: the suicide rate of children under 15 has quadrupled since the 1950s

Play can enhance children's understanding of other children's emotions and promote emotional regulation and competence.^{46,47}

- In play with peers, children practice and extend what they know about sharing, turn-taking, self-restraint, working in a group, and getting along with others.⁴⁸
- Because children naturally want to play with other children, they must learn and practice the ability to get along with others as equals to keep their playmates happy enough to keep playing.⁴⁹
- High levels of pretend play are associated with high emotion regulation and emotional competence with peers for girls. Physical play is associated with emotional competence with peers for boys.

Play can help children develop the ability to overcome challenges and adversity.

- Small children use imaginative play and fantasy to take on their fears and create a world they can master. It also allows them to practice adult roles. As they experience mastery of the world they create, children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resilience they need to address future challenges.⁵⁰
- Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed*, contends that the very character traits play helps children develop and nurture—like grit, curiosity, and social intelligence—“are at least as important [as IQ] in a child’s success and quite possibly more important.” Play becomes even more critical for children coping with adversity. “Children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments and harder to follow directions.”⁵¹

As our world becomes more complex, future generations will need to be even more adaptable and resilient. Restoring the joy of play—with all its benefits—to every childhood is one of the best ways we can help prepare our children to meet challenges.



“I like to play because you get energy and you get the most power. Brain power. And you learn.”

–7 year-old girl

Join us in our efforts to promote and protect play everywhere

It's time to get serious about play. We must sound a nationwide alarm about the consequences of play's vanishing act: lower academic engagement, rising childhood obesity rates, rising child mental illness rates, and a less creative and competitive workforce. We need to give every child the joyful childhood they deserve by ensuring they are playing every day. When individuals, families, and communities come together for play—by limiting screentime at home, by protecting recess in schools, and by working in our communities to offer free, safe places to play—we can help children realize the incredible benefits that play offers. Play contributes both to their current happiness and their future success in work and in life. Play builds healthy minds and bodies, which is imperative to ensuring that America remains globally competitive and can thrive in the dynamic 21st century.

The moment has come for us to protect the benefits of play by promoting a healthy balance of all types of play—and to do this, we need innovative efforts and bold new ideas in communities across the country. Whether you make decisions for your family or can influence decisions that affect your community, everyone is responsible for being part of the solution.

Share your ideas and see ideas from others taking action for play at kaboom.org/act.



Notes

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This report was made possible with support from the Mattel Children's Foundation

