

WHO'S PLAYING AROUND NOW?

OVERSCHEDULED PARENTS MEAN OVERSCHEDULED KIDS

by Dave Quist



Remember playing “Hide and Seek” until it was too dark to see – when the only boundaries were the neighbourhood itself? Street hockey tournaments that never really ended and “Monopoly” games that went on for most of the summer? What happened? Many researchers wonder if today’s children are being unnecessarily organized. Did we forget how to play, or did we organize our children’s activities to the point that spontaneity no longer exists?

Research is showing there were benefits to unorganized – and even unsupervised – play and there are reasons why this element of what was once a normal childhood is disappearing. Children are busy, perhaps unsurprisingly, because parents are busy, a trend with detrimental effects on the concept of family time.

On January 10, 2007, the *New York Times* reported that New York City “is on the verge of a bold experiment in

the way children play, one that could accelerate the trend away from monkey bars, swings and seesaws used by generations of city children.”¹ The concept involves the use of “trained play workers” who will assist children play with a new playground that is designed to trigger their imagination. This raises all kinds of questions: Do children need to be taught how to use their imagination at a playground?

Dr. Lisa Sutherland from the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) has studied the activity level of children and determined that they are 13 per cent less active now than they were in the 1980s.² In fact this trend started in the 1970s as researched by the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Centre. Their results indicated that “since the 1970s children have lost 12 hours per week in free time, which includes a 25-per-cent drop in play and a 50-per-cent drop in unstructured outdoor activities.”³

Too safety conscious?

A culture of lawsuits has created a nation of protectors, rather than adventurers. Sergio Pellis, a neuroscience researcher at the University of Lethbridge, has recently completed a study of rats and their natural activity and play. His conclusion is that “[h]orseplay and roughhousing on the playground, often a contentious issue for school boards and families, enhances emotional and peer development.” He continues by saying, “Rough-and-tumble play is a crucial childhood experience. . . . If adults don’t allow this rough-and-tumble play, they run the risk that a child might be undeveloped from being denied the opportunity to develop important social skills.”²⁴

Jane Vallentyne, associate professor of physical education and recreation at the University of Alberta, agrees, stating that “horseplay is an essential part of a child’s development. Children need to run, climb, chase and flee. That sort of physicality is inherent to our nature. If we put children in a culture of fear by taking away anything that can possibly cause an injury, we are putting our kids at greater risk.”

Maybe our children have learned only too well from their parents. The drop in children’s unstructured play time hasn’t come out of the blue: We see a similar drop in adult – read parents – leisure time. In a recent Statistics Canada report, researcher Martin Turcotte found that workers are spending less time now with their families than they did 20 years ago. “In 1986, workers spent, on average, 4.2 hours, or 250 minutes, engaged in various activities with their spouse, their children or other family members. Nearly 20 years later, by 2005, this average number of hours had dropped to 3.4 hours, or 206 minutes, an average decline of about 45 minutes.”²⁵ Of interest in this study is that workers were not spending this time at work or with co-workers, but rather spending more time alone.

In short, we can ask whether kids are so busy because their parents are. And if parents are the ones who are too busy, perhaps the children are registered in a myriad of organized activities because Mom and Dad don’t have the time in their schedule to spend with them.

Quality time versus quantity time

And what do children think of this phenomenon? Ron Taffel, a therapist and observer of youth culture has interviewed children aged preschool to the 6TH grade. His results are striking, indicating that the “one wish expressed by every child was that their parents spend more time with them.”²⁶

The idea of quality time is pervasive: We often hear that parents are spending quality time with their children. Taffel’s research shows that children simply want our time.

While “quality time” set aside with our children for special events is important, whether it be a fishing trip, participation in a cultural event or reading a story together, there is also a distinct need on the part of both children

and parents just to be together. We might call that “quantity time.” Just being in each other’s company provides many benefits. There are teaching moments when we wash the dishes or rake leaves together. We teach our children life skills as we shop for groceries or clean the basement together. Our children will become accustomed to sharing their day’s highlights, and lowlights, if there is enough time to share together.

The problem in freeing up a child’s time may lie in analyzing the root of the problem in parental schedules. If children need to be “unscheduled” it’s because we need to set the appropriate example ourselves.

Options to consider

So what can we do? Children need our time and attention on a regular, day-to-day basis. This is a tall order for many parents, and single parents have an even bigger challenge in this area.

Perhaps more than anything, as parents we need to be sure that we have our priorities in order. Yes, jobs and careers are demanding, but with our last breath, it’s unlikely we’ll declare “I sure wish I had spent more time on the job.” Seasons of life have always been busy or slow, whether it was our forefathers planting and harvesting or completing the office budget before the deadline. That said, today we often attempt to maintain a more frenetic pace on a regular basis, only to have one of the juggling balls hit the ground.

Naturally, there are benefits in organized sports, music lessons and the like for children. But children also need time to interact with each other on a more informal basis and even spend some time alone, processing life’s events. Playdates may be a great idea, but let’s not organize every moment of our children’s activities. Allow them to be engaged in free-thinking, stimulating and creative activities that involve their imagination and the resources they have at hand and encourage them to use their imagination, whether it is outdoors or indoors, in small groups or large. The challenges that they address and overcome will serve them well in the long term.

As parents, we want our children to experience life at its best, to be successful, to avoid the hurts that we experienced as children. But it is also life’s challenges that shape children in preparation for adulthood. Research tells us kids need time to play and the presence of their parents. Children grow up fast enough – parents shouldn’t miss out on the joys of parenting by rushing our children from activity to activity – in effect, by rushing them through their childhood.

endnotes

- 1 Cardwell, D. (2007, January 10) New York tries to think outside the sandbox. *New York Times*, p. 1
- 2 Wooding, S. (2005). *The Parenting Crisis*. Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, p. 195.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Tetley, D. (2007, March 21). Horsing around ‘crucial’ to child’s development. *Calgary Herald*, p. B3.
- 5 Statistics Canada (2007, February 13). *Canadian Social Trends*. Catalogue no. 11-008.
- 6 LeFebvre, J. E. (2005) *Over Scheduled Kids*. Retrieved April 30, 2007 from <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/pp/pdf/over%20scheduled%20kids.pdf>