

The Play of Children: Lessening Stress and Increasing Self-Control

Robert Brooks, Ph. D.

In my discussions with parents and teachers I increasingly hear an observation that should not come as a revelation to anyone who interacts on a regular basis with children, namely, that today's kids seem more stressed than those in previous generations. This is not to minimize the reality that children in the past were anxious, but rather that in today's world there appears to be a greater prevalence of kids who are stressed out. Perhaps of even greater concern is that this phenomenon is becoming evident in younger and younger children. In my travels it is not unusual for parents and educators to express concern about the noticeable worries that burden kindergarten age kids.

When I consult with schools one of my favorite activities in addition to presenting during the day with teachers and in the evening with parents is to spend time observing classrooms and chatting with students. I have been very impressed by the openness of students of all ages to share their feelings and thoughts with me. I frequently ask students about their experiences at school and what advice they would like me to offer their teachers and parents. While I am not surprised by recommendations to improve the quality of food in the cafeteria or to tell parents not to nag about homework, I have listened to kindergartners and first graders voice genuine worry about getting good grades or getting into a so-called good college. These comments are striking coming from five and six-year-olds!

Some teachers wonder if they may be contributing unintentionally to the angst of young children. A kindergarten teacher told me, "All we talk about in the teachers' lounge is preparing kids for state-wide tests. We feel that how our students do on these tests is a reflection of our teaching. Some of my colleagues teaching second and third grade have half-kiddingly encouraged me to begin to prepare the kids in kindergarten to take tests so that their job will be easier when kids reach their classes. If you visit my class you would probably think I was teaching first-grade given the emphasis on academics. It seems we're teaching academic material at younger ages at the expense of kids playing and having fun."

I thought of this teacher's remarks as well as similar observations while reading two articles, one in *The Boston Globe* titled "Pressure-Cooker Kindergarten" by Patti Hartigan, the other in *The New York Times* titled "Can the Right Kinds of Play Teach Self-Control?" by Paul Tough. Both articles question the movement away from play towards academics in young children. (Readers may wish to read my November, 2006 article that addresses the importance of play in nurturing children's emotional and cognitive growth.)

"Children Learning that They Are Dumb"

The *Globe* article examines the pressure felt by kindergarten children, noting, "Increasingly in schools across Massachusetts and the United States, little children are being asked to perform academic tasks, including test taking, that early childhood researchers agree are developmentally inappropriate, even potentially damaging. If children don't meet certain requirements, they are deemed 'not proficient.' Frequently, children are screened before school begins, and some are labeled inadequate before they walk through the door. . . . There is a growing disconnect between what the research says is best for children—a classroom free of pressure—and what's actually going on in school."

Renowned psychologist David Elkind, author of the bestselling *The Hurried Child* as well as *Miseducation* and *The Power of Play*, concurs that this disconnect exists, expressing that when children are required to engage in academic material at too early an age, they are basically being told that they are failures. Elkind offers a powerful comment. "We are sending too many children to school to learn that they are dumb. They are not dumb. They are just not there developmentally."

I agree with Elkind's perspective. Lest anyone misunderstand, I am not suggesting that if young children display developmental lags they should not be provided with services. I am a strong advocate of early intervention programs to facilitate the progress of children with documented developmental problems. However, early intervention does not imply trying to stuff information into children who are not ready to assimilate that information. Rather, intensive early intervention programs are effective when they are carefully administered to strengthen those skills in children that are significantly delayed.

Evidence for the Disconnect

Both *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* articles cite a recent report released by the nonprofit advocacy group Alliance for Childhood. The report, “Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in Schools,” examined the findings of nine studies of public school classrooms in the United States. Hartigan, referring to the report notes, “Kindergartners in the studies spent four to six times as much of the school day being drilled in literacy and math as they did playing. Recess has been truncated or has disappeared entirely in some schools, a double whammy, since children are stressed out by the demands and also deprived of their major stress reliever. The report cites study after study showing increasing stress, aggression, and other behavior problems, and even breakdowns.” (I addressed the importance of having regularly scheduled physical activity in schools in my September, 2008 article, in which I highlighted the excellent book *Spark* by psychiatrist John Ratey.)

In his *New York Times* piece, Tough also quotes the Alliance for Childhood report. “Kindergarten has ceased to be a garden of delight and has become a place of stress and distress. There is too much testing and too little free time and kids are being forced to try to read before they are ready.” Tough notes that the authors of the report advocate an increase of “unstructured play” in kindergarten. “If kids are allowed to develop at their own paces, they will be happier and healthier and less stressed out. And there will still be plenty of time later on to learn how to read.”

Different Perspectives about Play

Many educators might be skeptical about the long-term benefits of a heavy reliance on “unstructured play,” arguing that little, if any, learning will transpire. Similar to most debates about educational practices, one must be careful not to adhere to extreme positions. To set up a dichotomy in which play and learning are cast as polar opposites is to blind oneself to the ways in which each can enrich the other. I believe that play activities provide many opportunities for learning and that learning is enhanced when the environment is characterized by fun and play.

Interestingly, some developmental experts believe that creating and applying a more structured form of play might bridge any seeming gap between play and learning. For example, Deborah Leong and Elena Bodrova in Denver have devoted their attention

to developing systematic programs of play to nurture self-control in young children, a topic of great interest to me, having co-authored with my friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child*. As we discuss in our book, the emergence of self-regulation is a key skill that impacts on all areas of a child's development.

Tough notes in his article that during the past 15 years Leong and Bodrova have drawn upon the teachings of famed Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and created a curriculum for prekindergarten and kindergarten students called Tools of the Mind. The program is now being used to teach 18,000 prekindergarten and kindergarten students in 12 states around the country.

Vygotsky envisioned as a major goal of preschool education learning to think before one acts and believed that play could serve as a vehicle through which to accomplish this goal. Tough writes, "At the heart of the Tools of the Mind methodology is a simple but surprising idea: that the key to developing self-regulation is play, and lots of it. But not just any play. The necessary ingredient is what Leong and Bodrova call 'mature dramatic play': complex, extended make-believe scenarios, involving multiple children and lasting for hours, even days. If you want to succeed in school and life, they say, you first need to spend hour after hour dressing up in firefighter hats and wedding gowns, cooking make-believe hamburgers and pouring nonexistent tea, doing the hard, serious work of playing pretend."

As I read "the hard, serious work of playing pretend," I could not help wondering if this was an oxymoron. How could words such as "hard" and "serious" be affixed to a description of play? Yet, as I reflected upon this seeming contradiction my thoughts drifted to the application of play in therapy, in which difficult themes in a child's life are addressed in the context of fantasy and imagination. Having used play and storytelling in many of my therapeutic endeavors reminded me that the concept of play embraced a wide continuum of activities.

Unlike several other psychologists of his time, Vygotsky believed that imaginary play was not an immature form of expression, but rather a more powerful predictor of future academic success than a child's vocabulary, counting skills, or knowledge of the alphabet.

Tough elaborates that according to Vygotsky “dramatic play was the training ground where children learned to regulate themselves. . . . To Vygotsky dramatic play was the arena where children’s actions were most tightly restricted. When a young boy is acting out the role of a daddy making breakfast, he is limited by all the rules of daddy-ness. Some of those limitations come from his playmates: if he starts acting like a baby (or a policeman or a dinosaur) in the middle of making breakfast, the other children will be sure to steer him back to the eggs and bacon. But even beyond that explicit peer pressure, Vygotsky would say the child is guided by the basic principles of play. Make-believe isn’t as stimulating and satisfying—it simply isn’t as much fun—if you don’t stick to your role. And when children follow the rules of make-believe and push one another to follow those rules, he said, they develop important habits of self-control.”

Tough continues, “There are not yet firm experimental data that prove that Tools of the Mind works. But two early studies begun in the late 1990s in Denver showed some promising results.” One study found that after being exposed to the program for a year, young children performed significantly better than a similar group on basic measures of literacy. Another study found that students in the Tough for Minds program consistently scored higher on tests requiring “executive functioning,” a concept that includes the ability to plan and organize, to think before one acts, to display self-control.

For some, the Tools of the Mind approach may be interpreted as casting play in a rigid format that appears to be anything but play. This view may be reinforced by other activities in the program such as “coaching” preschool children on dramatic play called Make Believe Play Practice. The latter involves the teacher guiding children through the mechanics of pretending such as comforting a crying baby doll and asking what one should do when the baby is distressed. In addition, children “review” their play activities with their teacher on a weekly basis. Such exercises are theorized to encourage children to reflect on different behaviors and in the process to develop self-control.

Some may question whether “coached play” is deserving of the label of play. Some may argue that while the program facilitates the development of self-regulation, it presents play as an academic task, robbing it of the qualities of fun and enjoyment advocated by Elkind and the authors of the Alliance for Childhood report.

Tough observes, “The most lasting effect of the Tools of the Mind studies may be to challenge some of the basic ideas about the boundary between work and play. Today, play is seen by most teachers and education scholars as a break from hard work or a reward for positive behaviors, not a place to work on cognitive skills. But in the Tools of the Mind classrooms that distinction disappears: work looks a lot like play, and play is treated more like work.”

There are child development specialists such as Angela Duckworth, a psychologist on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, who appreciate the complexity of the relationship between work and play. Duckworth is a leading researcher in the area of teaching children self-control.

Tough interviewed Duckworth about the tenuous boundaries between work and play. She answered, “We often think of play as relaxing and doing what we want to do. Maybe it’s an American thing: We work really hard, and then we go on vacation and have fun. But in fact, very few truly pleasurable moments come from complete hedonism. What Tools of the Mind does—and maybe what we all need to do—is to blur the line a bit between what is work and what is play. Just because something is effortful and difficult and involves some amount of constraint doesn’t mean it can’t be fun.”

Duckworth’s observations returned me once again to the theme of play in therapy. As a clinician I am acutely aware that a delicate balance is necessary when engaging in therapeutic play. I recognize that children need to feel free and safe to initiate play and fantasy activities without their experiencing me as being too directive or too intrusive. Yet, I also appreciate there are times when the play of children affords me opportunities to enter their world, to raise questions within the play, and to use their play to facilitate the learning of new skills. For example, there are features of the “Creative Characters” storytelling technique I developed for children (please see my February, 2009 article for a description of “Creative Characters”) that are directed by the therapist. In refining “Creative Characters” I learned to move non-intrusively between different levels of structure, always guided by the goal of assisting children to cope more effectively with the many challenges they confront on a daily basis.

A Concluding Thought

I began this article by questioning the practice of attempting to teach children academic material before they were ready to assimilate this material, thereby leaving them vulnerable and stressed, and in some cases as Elkind emphasizes, wondering whether they are “dumb.” Instead, I focused on the importance of play, emphasizing that play should be conceptualized as existing along a continuum from unstructured to structured. Within the boundaries of this ever changing, dynamic continuum, play can provide an avenue through which to create a safe and stimulating environment in which cognitive and emotional development can flourish. In such an environment children are likely to invite us into their world of play and allow us to serve as guides as they learn more about themselves and their world, gaining a sense of confidence and mastery that will last throughout their lives.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>