

Taking Playtime Seriously

The Checkup

From the New York Times

By PERRI KLASS, M.D., JAN. 29, 2018



Play is a universal, cross-cultural and necessary attribute of childhood, essential for development and essential for learning. Experts who study it say that play is intrinsic to children's natures, but still needs support and attention from the adults around them.

Children are natural players, right from the beginning. "It's hard to imagine when an infant or a toddler playing," said Catherine Tamis-

Learning Landscapes Initiative, which aims to set up learning opportunities in public places where people will encounter them. One of these, the [Urban Thinkscape project](#) in Philadelphia, involves puzzle benches at bus stops, with puzzles designed to build STEM skills.

Before the benches were installed, she said, parents waiting for buses were almost uniformly looking at their cellphones. "Now we're starting to see playful learning interactions." They have also tried putting up a big chalkboard with a prompt for people to complete: When I was little, I played ...

"We put one up in a park," she said. "In four days it was completely filled with responses." And interestingly, the activities people cited from their own childhoods were mostly free recess-type activities with other kids.

As children get older, she said, some of their playing continues to be free play, in which a child goes out into the world as a discoverer and an explorer, and some is "constrained tinkering," which she compared to bowling with bumpers. "People learn best when they're active, when they're engaged rather than distracted, when it's socially interactive, and when it's joyful," she said.

Free play, she said, reduces stress and also "allows our kids to flex their entrepreneurial muscle." But guided play is also important, as children grow, and parents should look for toys and environments (like children's museums) that feed children's curiosity and offer new opportunities for exploration.

What happens when children start playing more with virtual objects, manipulating touch screens instead of blocks and books?

most need are interactions, language, give and take, which can just be another way of saying somebody to play with. No special skills or equipment are needed; every parent learns the virtue of pots and spoons as playthings, and boxes that are more fascinating to babies than the toys they contained.

As children get older, we need to keep an eye on whether their schools give them time to play, we need to help them go on engaging with the world around them, and we might even be able to make that world a better environment for learning and play. Again, this is not about walling children off into special places where they can play, it's about helping them play and learn in the world, in the homes and schoolrooms and larger environments in which they live and grow.

"Play is not a specific activity, it's an approach to learning, an engaged, fun, curious way of discovering your world," Dr. Tamis-LeMonda said.