

## **Kids Need Time to Play! – Fall 2006**

A new report from the American Academy of Pediatrics “says free and unstructured play is healthy and - in fact - essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient.” This report was written as a reaction to the ever demanding and hurried lifestyles that children face today due to heavy academic and extracurricular loads and cites a number of factors that have led to decreased time for free play among America’s children:

- More children are in child care settings and after school care with programmed activities and an academic focus, rather than time for free play.
- Parents feel pressured to provide as many extra-curricular opportunities as possible for their children.
- As the college admission process has become more rigorous, families feel pressured to begin building a college resume of academic excellence and a wide range of activities and volunteer efforts at much younger ages than in years past.
- Because high schools are judged by the rates in which students are accepted into prestigious universities, students are pressured to carry increasingly rigorous academic schedules filled with honors/AP courses.
- There is a national trend in schools to place more focus on reading and math, resulting in decreased time left for other subjects, creative arts, physical education and recess.
- Children are spending more time in passive entertainment – television and video games – rather than creative free play.
- Due to safety concerns regarding unsupervised outdoor play, children spend less time playing outdoors.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that enrichment, academic and extra-curricular activities serve as a great benefit to American children when they are kept in balance with a child’s individual need for down time and free play. According to the report, “The challenge for society, schools, and parents is to strike the balance that allows all children to reach their potential without pushing them beyond their personal comfort limits and while allowing them personal free playtime.” When this balance is not reached, hurried and overscheduled children suffer from stress, anxiety, depression, perfectionism and an overly critical self evaluation. The AAP states in their report that this lack of balance is taking its toll on U.S. college students, as a survey by the American College Health Association reported that “61% of college students had feelings of hopelessness during the previous academic year, 45% felt so depressed they had trouble functioning, and 9% suffered suicidal ideation.” The report also notes that American families of highly scheduled children also suffer as family time is sacrificed in order to arrange activities and transport children. Rather than striving to arm children with every talent possible, the report emphasizes the importance of building the character traits that will enable children to “navigate an increasingly complex world as they grow older.” The report states that “confidence, the ability to master ones environment, and a deep-seated connectedness to caring about others creates the love, safety, and security that children need to thrive. In addition, to be resilient – to remain optimistic and be able to rebound from adversity – young people need the essential character traits of honesty, generosity, decency, tenacity, and compassion. Children are most likely to gain all of these essential traits when parents and children have time to be together, and to look to each other for positive support and unconditional love.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the following guidelines to help encourage more time for free play:

- Choose “true toys”, such as blocks and dolls, in which children use their imagination over passive toys that require limited imagination.
- Find a healthy balance between an appropriately challenging academic schedule, extracurricular activities and ample time for family interaction and free play. Parents should carefully consider each child’s unique needs and not competitive community standards.
- Carefully evaluate claims by advertisers about products or programs designed to produce “super-children”.
- Understand that each child does not need to excel in multiple areas to be considered successful or prepared to compete in the real world.
- Choose childcare and early education programs that meet children’s social and emotional developmental needs as well as academic preparedness.

For information on stress reduction and coping skills for children and teens visit: [www.aap.org/stress](http://www.aap.org/stress)