

12 proven *and surprising* benefits of child-directed (aka unscheduled and spontaneous) play for our stressed-out, over-supervised kids.

[By Dr. Michele Borba](#)

Okay folks, I'm concerned. Over the last few weeks I've been reviewing studies involving children and play. "Shocked" and "disturbed" are the two words that describe how I feel when reading those reports.

Every study reaches one sad conclusion: Good old-fashioned play is quickly becoming an endangered pastime for today's plugged-in, over-scheduled kids.

Worse yet, play is not only disappearing from our homes and neighborhoods, but our schools as well. And this comes at the same time when reports show that stress is mounting to new heights in our kids while their mental health has plummeted to a twenty-five year all-time low. A good old fashioned childhood of cloud-gazing, leaf-kicking, and hill rolling is disappearing to be replaced by screens, earplugs, flashcards and tutors.

Facts About Today's Play-Deprived Kids

- Since the late 1970s there's been a 25% drop in our children's free play and a 50% drop in unstructured outdoor activities
- Since the late 1970s kids time in organized, adult-supervised sports have doubled and the number of minutes devoted each week to passive leisure, not including watching television, has increased from 30 minutes to more than three hours
- The average U.S. child is now "plugged-in" to some kind of digital device—not including cell phone and text—7 1/2 hours a day

The loss of play and even skepticism about its value may be partly due to a more competitive, "no-child left untested era" (don't get me started on that one...), our increasingly hurried, quicker-pace life style, and the belief we have to schedule our kids with activity after activity to stretch those IQ points. Now Tiger Mom—and every media outlet out there appearing to quote her—is urging every so-called "Western" mom to halt those play dates and any child-chosen activity.

Whatever the reason, today's kids are playing less and many experts—and the kids—are crying, "Foul!" and with good reason. Dozens of studies prove that play is not just a luxury but essential to our children's healthy development.

12 Scientific Benefits of Play

We've always known that "kids and play" are just a natural combo. But new research also shows that letting kids engage in self-directed play has immense value for their social, emotional, cognitive and physical growth. Here are just a few of the proven scientific benefits of letting our kids get messy and doing something besides clicking those darn keypads and video controllers and paper and pencil tasks:

1. Play boosts children's creativity and imagination. Play gives children the chance to invent, build, expand, explore and develop a whole different part of the brain.

2. Play stretches our children's attention span. Playing outdoors just 30 minutes a day increases child's ability to focus and pay attention.

3. Play and rough-housing boost boys' problem solving abilities. The more elementary school-boys engaged in rough-housing, the better they scored on a test of social problem solving. (Don't ya love that one!)

4. Play boosts self-confidence and self-regulation. Kids learn to become masters of their own destiny without an adult directing, pushing, managing or scheduling.

5. Play forges friendships, strengthens social competence and teaches social skills. Undirected play allows kids to learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, communicate and develop core social skills they need not only now but for the rest of their lives.

6. Play helps kids learn to enjoy just being in their own company, entertain themselves and develop identity. Ease that guilt when your kid says, “I’m bored, Mom!”

7. Play reduces children’s anxiety and diminishes stress. A study published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* shows that play is also critical for our children’s emotional health because it helps kids work through anxiety and reduce stress.

8. Play creates joyful memories of childhood. Come on, no kid is going to remember the car pools and worksheets but the swings, jumping in leaves, playing leapfrog in the mud, blowing bubbles, building forts—those are the unforgettable childhood moments. Sigh!

9. Play boosts physical health and reduces risk of obesity. Henry Joseph Legere, MD, author of *Raising Healthy Eaters* points out: “Rises in screen time have led to the rise of a sedentary lifestyle for our children. In 1982, the childhood obesity prevalence in the United States was actually less than 4 percent. By 2004, that number had grown to about 30 percent.”

10. Play expands our kids minds and neurological development. Self-initiated play improve skills such as guessing, figuring, interpreting and is important to brain development and learning

11. Play builds new competencies, leadership skills, teaches lifelong hobbies, and develops resilience. “Play is what allows kids to manipulate their environment,” says a report written by Kenneth Ginsburg, M.D. of the AAP, “And how you manipulate your environment is about how you begin to take control, how you begin to develop your senses, how you view the world.”

12. Play nurtures the parent-child bond. Child-driven play also improves our parent-kid relationship. Play offers a wonderful opportunity for parents to see the world from our children’s eyes as well as strengthen our relationship when we join in.

In fact, playing with our kids is one of the few times when clocks stop and stress fades. There’s no judgments, schedules or time constraints that worry us. It’s just a glorious opportunity to give our kids our full presence, be in their space and enjoy each other’s company, and build those wonderful childhood memories. Keep in mind folks, there’s no rewind button when it comes to childhood!

So parents, why not just this week push pause and tune into your kids’ schedule? I dare you: take a Reality Check and see just how unstructured, unsupervised time your kid has. While you’re at it, here are a few questions to help you assess if play should be added to the “Endangered Species List” at your home.

Reality Check: Could Your Kids Be ‘Play Deprived’?

How much are your kids plugged into some kind of a digital device?

How often are your kids glued to that TV or clicking that keypad?

How much free time do your kids have that is unscheduled, unplanned, unsupervised?

How often do your kids go outdoors to just recompress?

Do your kids know how to entertain themselves solo an adult, coach, teacher, or you whether it be indoors or out?

Do your kids enjoy the great outdoors?

How often (if ever) do your kids see you throwing off your shoes and joining in the unplanned, spontaneous fun with them?

Do your kids know outdoor age-appropriate games and have the equipment for those activities whether it be hopscotch, jump rope, Red Rover, I Spy, basketball, freeze-tag, kick the can, skateboarding?

Do your kids know how to self-entertain and do activities that would nurture their creativity or imagination on a regular basis?

Do you set a rule that when friends come to the house a minimum or no plugged-in devices are allowed?

Would your kid say that you encourage them to play unstructured?

How do you respond when your kids get messy? (Just asking...but remember letting your kids get messy every now and then is actually a great way to teach them that nobody's perfect, accidents do happen, and teaches them to enjoy themselves and their own company).

Let's remember: Play is an essential — not a luxury — for our children's well-being. Thirty years of solid child development research confirms that play is crucial for our children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive growth. So check into your kids' lives and make sure at least a bit of "free time" is a part of their waking hours.

What do you think? Are our kids becoming play-deprived? And if they are, what do you see as the disadvantages?

[Dr. Michele Borba, Parenting Expert](#). You can also refer to my daily blog, [Dr. Borba's Reality Check](#) for ongoing parenting solutions and late-breaking news and research about child development.



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One Response to “12 Surprising Benefits of Play”

1. *Debbie* says:

[March 12, 2011 at 10:21 am](#)

I agree that there is probably too much structured play as opposed to unstructured (free) play. But the challenge for me as a parent was how do I allow unstructured play? Anytime I ask my boys to get off the T.V and find something else to play with, they complain they are bored. What I have done is to engage them in fun outdoor activities. I recently bought bikes and scooters and encourage them to play on this regularly. During the summer they have fun helping with chores around the house, although this means it takes me longer to get anything done. But it keeps them away from TV and Wii. I'm not certain this is the right approach, I could be doing something more but it seems to be working for me...