



## Restoring Play and Playful Learning to U.S. Kindergartens

**New research has documented the disappearance of play from U.S. kindergartens. This essential mode of learning for young children has largely been replaced by didactic instruction, often scripted, and by testing. Kindergarten teachers in New York and Los Angeles spend two to three hours per day teaching and testing children in math and literacy, with 30 minutes per day or less for child-initiated play.<sup>1</sup>**

Experienced early childhood educators know that play by itself does not make for a high-quality classroom. But when child-initiated play is combined with teacher-guided activities approached in playful and artistic ways, a potent cross-fertilization occurs. Expert kindergarten teachers use books, storytelling, songs, verses, themed projects, and other forms of experiential and playful learning. Children absorb knowledge

deeply when it is presented in this way. It reinforces their own impulse to play and becomes an integral part of the child.

Play-based preschools and kindergartens show significantly better long-term outcomes, both academically and socially, than didactic and overly academic programs for young children. Yet false assumptions about the importance of learning discrete cognitive skills, such as decoding and phonics, at an early age have led many schools to adopt developmentally inappropriate practices in kindergarten.

Parental pressure has sometimes been a factor in the increased focus on academic achievement in kindergartens. But new research suggests that parents are growing worried about the loss of childhood: 95% of mothers surveyed in the U.S. expressed concern that their children were growing up too quickly and missing out on the joys and experiential learning opportunities of free play and natural exploration.<sup>2</sup>

### RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

#### What Is Needed to Restore Play and Playful Learning to Kindergarten?

**Teacher education and professional development:** Managing play-rich classrooms requires sophisticated understanding of children’s development, keen observation skills, and practical knowledge of play and playful learning techniques. New resources for early childhood teacher education that support play-based learning and address the needs of modern children, especially English-language learners and those at risk and with disabilities, are of critical importance.

**Sensible kindergarten policies:** One-size-fits-all standards for kindergartners make no sense. Kindergarten guidelines should reflect appropriate learning goals and the facts of child development—e.g., young children learn best through play and active experience. Goals should not be so numerous as to require hours of daily instruction. Assessments should be based on multiple observational measures. Tests should be limited to essential individual screening for developmental delays, and the results should never be the sole or primary criterion for making important decisions. Ample time and resources for play and recess—including blocks and props for make-believe play—should be guaranteed.

**A commitment to research:** Pilot programs for developing rich play-based kindergartens should be designed, implemented, and evaluated. Long-term research on the outcomes of various kindergarten programs, including play-based and academic approaches, should be funded.

<sup>1</sup>Miller and Almon, *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, Alliance for Childhood, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Singer et al., “Children’s Pastimes and Play in Sixteen Nations,” *American Journal of Play*, Winter 2008.

*Research shows that play and playful learning enhance every aspect of the young child's development.*

- A study of 90 four- and five-year-olds showed that free play stimulates interest in mathematics, regardless of socio-economic status or gender. (Ginsberg and Seo, "What Is Developmentally Appropriate in Early Childhood Mathematics Education?" 2004.)
- Unstructured play fosters creative thinking and social problem-solving ability. (Moore and Russ, *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 2006.) Dramatic play enhances the development of language and literacy. (Dickinson and Tabors, *Beginning Literacy with Language*, 2001.)
- A review of research by Yale psychologists concludes that make-believe play helps young children "(a) expand vocabulary and link objects with actions, (b) develop object constancy, (c) form event schemas and scripts, (d) learn strategies for problem-solving, (e) develop divergent thinking ability, and (f) develop a flexibility in shifting between different types of thought (narrative and logical)." (Singer et al., *American Journal of Play*, Winter 2008.)
- Germany compared children from 50 play-based kindergartens and 50 centers for cognitive achievement. By age ten the children who had played in kindergarten excelled over the others in many areas: reading, mathematics, social and emotional adjustment, creativity, intelligence, oral expression, and "industry." (Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder, "Curriculum Studies and the Traditions of Inquiry," *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, 1992.)
- Differences in long-term outcomes from play versus academic preschools are profound. One-

third of the low-income at-risk children who attended instruction-oriented preschools were arrested for a felony by age 23, compared with fewer than one-tenth of those who were in play-oriented preschools. As adults, more than 25% of those from academic preschools were suspended from work, compared with fewer than 7% of those who attended play-oriented preschools. (Schweinhart and Weikart, *High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study*, 1997.)

- Walter Gilliam of Yale found a strong correlation between preschool expulsion and lack of time for dramatic play in the classroom. (Gilliam presentation at NAEYC Professional Development Institute, Charlotte, NC, June 2009.)

The American Academy of Pediatrics, in its definitive clinical report on the importance of play for young children's healthy development, states that "play helps children develop ... confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges. Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills."

*Organizations and institutions that are actively involved in supporting children's free play include:* Alliance for Childhood, Arbor Day Foundation, Association for Childhood Education International, Children and Nature Network, Children's Environments Research Group at the City University of New York, International Play Association, KaBoom!, Natural Learning Institute at North Carolina State University, National Institute for Play, National Wildlife Federation, New York City Parks Department, Sarah Lawrence College Child Development Institute, U.S. Play Coalition, Wild Zones, and YMCA.

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THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD is a nonprofit partnership of educators, health professionals, and other advocates for children who are concerned about the decline in children's health and well-being.

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