

# NEWS RELEASE

For Guest Columnist Article

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## Who Wants To Play?

Recently, I was asked to think back on a happy childhood memory; a pretty easy task for me considering I had many to choose from. Growing up on a farm in rural Wake County, I remember playing red light-green light under the shade tree, building forts by the pond and counting cars that passed by in the front yard. Each of the memories that I reflected upon had a common theme: each involved some form of play.

After surveying several people about their own “happy childhood memories,” I have come to realize how extremely important unstructured and imaginative play is for many people’s healthy development. If play times were such strong memories, aren’t those lessons that we learned as important as any other planned learning activity? Or were they more important considering how no one I surveyed remembered a school science lesson.

According to Diane Levin, a child development expert at Wheelock College, “developing imagination and creativity is essential for children to develop problem-solving skills.” However, all too many times adults believe young children should be learning how to read, write and recite numbers at a very young age.

Adults often associate play with fun and relaxation in contrast to the attention required for “work.” Children’s play is a common misconception of adults. While play for an adult may be associated with fun and relaxation, play for children is a basic mode of learning. The repetition which comes with play produces discovery that we, as adults may not be able to fathom.

As the decades pass, play is no longer a right of every child, but more of a luxury. Now with an increased focus on student achievement, extracurricular activities and pop culture, free-play has become somewhat a thing of the past. According to a study by Sandra Hofferth at the University of Maryland, over the last two decades children have lost eight hours of unstructured free-play a week and more than 30,000 schools have eliminated recess to make more time for academics.

There are many simple things parents and caregivers can do to help combat the extinction of the imagination. One fun idea: offer children open ended toys like blocks or clay, and then encourage them to think of as many things as possible to do with these materials. Simple items such as paper clips, napkins or straws could draw a lot from the imagination as well. While

riding in the car, play games like finding the red cars or yellow stop lights. Try reading stories with children and stop just before the ending to ask children to make up the rest.

Children will find a way to engage in free play. It is our job to allow them the time to do it. First, examine your child's weekly schedule. Then ask yourself, is there an extra hour to set aside for some unstructured play? If so, the day will seem a little less stressful and a child's imagination will be allowed a little more freedom.

Just imagine, if our children are required to focus more on planned academic activities and given less creative freedom, when asked 20 years from now, what will their happy childhood memories be?