

NEW AAP REPORT STRESSES PLAY FOR HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Hurried lifestyle and heavy academic, extracurricular load taking toll; balance is needed

A new report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 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.

The report, "[The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds](#)," is written in defense of play and in response to forces threatening free play and unscheduled time. These forces include changes in family structure, the increasingly competitive college admissions process, and federal education policies that have led to reduced recess and physical education in many schools.

Whereas play protects children's emotional development, a loss of free time in combination with a hurried lifestyle can be a source of stress, anxiety and may even contribute to depression for many children, the AAP report states.

The report reaffirms that the most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare children for success come not from extracurricular or academic commitments, but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modeling and guidance.

Still, many parents are afraid to slow their pace for fear their children will fall behind. They feel like they are running on a treadmill, but worry they will not be acting as proper parents if they do not participate in a hurried lifestyle.

The report suggests that reduced time for physical activity may be contributing to the academic differences between boys and girls, as schools with sedentary learning styles become more difficult settings for some boys to navigate successfully.

Among the specific guidelines, the report suggests:

- Emphasizing the benefits of "true toys", such as blocks and dolls, in which children use their imagination fully over passive toys that require limited imagination;
- Supporting an appropriately challenging academic schedule for each child with a balance of extracurricular activities. This should be based on each child's unique needs and not on competitive community standards or need to gain college admissions;
- Helping parents evaluate claims by marketers and advertisers about products or interventions designed to produce "super-children;"
- Encouraging parents to understand that each young person does not need to excel in multiple areas to be considered successful or prepared to compete in the real world;
- Suggesting families choose childcare and early education programs that meet children's social and emotional developmental needs as well as academic preparedness.

The report recognizes that academic enrichment opportunities are vital for some children's ability to succeed academically, and that participation in organized activities promotes healthy youth development.

"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 time," the report states.

To help parents and teens develop resiliency and understand the role of stress in life, the AAP has created a Resiliency Web site.. This site features additional information on stress reduction and coping skills, as well as a stress management plan teens can personalize to fit their personalities and lifestyles. Visit www.aap.org/stress for more information.