



## Resource Article

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*"Authentically Exploring*  
*Children's Play"*

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Jeffery Goldstein, a renowned author on topics such as toys, play, media, and technology has written about the importance of play in young children's development. Goldstein describes the value of play and likens it to "...the cornerstone of our society because it requires communication and cooperation among people playing different roles and following agreed-upon rules" (2012, p. 3). He describes children's play in terms of what a child does with toys and how the child interacts with others. He also draws some interesting associations between play and children's wellbeing.

It is widely understood that, "Play is the lens through which children experience their world and the world of others" (in Goldstein, 2012, p. 5). Not only do we see evidence of this when observing children playing with objects, toys, and people but it can be observed at the neuroanatomical level as well. Goldstein refers to the work of Jaac Panksepp (2003) who found that a protein in the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex (responsible for organizing, monitoring, and planning for the future) was

stimulated by play. The emotional, social, and physical benefits of play are abundant. For example, play has been linked with reduced fear, anxiety, stress, and irritability, improved emotional flexibility and openness, increased empathy, compassion, and sharing, and improved nonverbal skills. Play has also been associated with positive emotional state, which has a positive influence of increasing the efficiency of immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems. Interestingly too is the constructive effect play has on a child's range of motion, agility, coordination, balance, and flexibility.

So how does the play of young children develop? Infants learn about their world by responding to others and by engaging in solitary play. Infants, between the birth and one year of age, respond to caregivers' interactions through facial expressions, by making sounds, and moving their bodies. Ideally, they learn that their needs (e.g., hunger, diapering, and sleep) will be met. Infants engage in sensorimotor play with toys and objects by feeling, grasping,

## Resource Article (continued)

mouth, smelling, listening, dropping, and looking around. They repeat these actions and begin to sequence these types of actions again and again. It is through this process that babies learn what objects taste, smell, look, sound, and feel like. Toddlers, between the ages of one and three years, begin exploratory play. As they become mobile and gain language they learn that they can affect their environment both verbally and physically. They can request help, protest, and initiate interaction with others. In terms of play with peers, toddlers begin with parallel play in which they play next to another child. This later develops into play with another other child. Social play comes in a little later, around three to four years of age. Social play is more complex and includes working together, negotiating, and engaging in interactive socio-dramatic play and more sophisticated play scenarios (e.g., children enact social roles in fantasy situations).

Goldstein points out some important aspects of play development. The emergence of symbolic play, for example, when a child learns to substitute a sponge for a boat in the bathtub, denotes a cognitive shift for that child because symbolic play is foundation for language development. When a child can substitute one thing for another, they are also likely to understand that a spoken word represents an idea. Goldstein also touts the importance of exposing children to a variety of types of play. He suggests that solitary play helps children develop independence, self-coping, and creativity. Play with adults (e.g., playful learning/guided play) supports the

development of more complex and sophisticated play and increases attention. Play with others promotes positive self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. Play outdoors provides children with varied sensory experiences (e.g., weather, sounds, crowds, textures, movement, etc.) and exercise, which is certainly an important consideration given the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity.

Goldstein lays out the importance of developmental progressions in young children, but he also cautions that opportunities for play are increasingly on the decline. Early interventionists can discuss the benefits of play and help caregivers identify and enhance their child's play and playful opportunities. Together interventionists and parents can explore ways to expand their child's current play skills, create increasingly responsive interactions, find ways to explore inside and outside, and determine other ways to take advantage of playful opportunities that are possible within the mix of the things that the family is already doing. By understanding more about the value of play, and knowing too that play is not just buying a new toy, interventionists can help families promote their child's play and future success.

Goldstein, J. (2012). Play in Children's Development, Health and Well-being (Feb.) Toy Industries of Europe. Brussels, Belgium. Accessed from: <https://d3gxp3iknbs7bs.cloudfront.net/attachments/2de4b88e-5770-4117-8bac-978144745e7b.pdf>



# What do the data say?

## How has social change influenced children's play?

Play is an important part of children's learning. Yet, children are generally not engaging in the amount of play as did children in the past (Pathways.org, 4 September 2015). Why is this?

The change is largely due to social change. The impact of social change over time is monumental on various aspects of day-to-day life for children and for their parents. This change in children's play did not come about abruptly, rather it has happened overtime and now, by looking back in time, we can understand what has influenced these changes in children's play.

Generally, the decline in children's play can be attributed to the hurried schedules of busy caregivers and the increasing academic pressure on school curricula. Also contributing to the play decline are decreased outdoor play, and the increase in children's interactions with electronic devices and technology. Let's explore these a bit closer and look at data reported by Kenneth Ginsburg.

*Busy parents:* Today, more families are led by single parents or by dual working parents. Family households today are also less multigenerational. While these factors alone do not contribute to reduced play opportunities for children, they do influence the amount of time parent and family members have to play with their children. Families have busy schedules and obligations that can take them away from quality playtime with their children. In turn, this can create stress for parents as they work to juggle their many responsibilities. Of course, one of those responsibilities is organizing care for their children while they are at work and the quality of that care determines the amount of play the children are afforded.

*Academic pressure:* There is an increasing national focus on academics, particularly reading and math. This is perhaps in part due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. While the well-laid intent was to address the growing unacceptable educational performance of America's children, it may have overshadowed the importance of children's social and emotional development, creative arts, outdoor play, physical

education, and recess. On the topic of recess, Bishop (2013) reported that 30% of American kindergarteners no longer have recess (in Pathways.org, 2015). The rigorous college admissions process also contributes to an increased emphasis on academic pressure and some parents feel this pressure when their children are very young. In fact, some parents feel this pressure as they are reviewing preschool options for their children. While academics are important an over emphasis or sole emphasis on academics can adversely impact a child's holistic development.

*Decreasing outdoor play:* Unfortunately, the availability of safe outside play spaces are decreasing. So too are shared parks and green spaces. Bishop (2013) reported that only 20% of homes in the U.S are located within a half-mile of a park (in Pathways.org, 2015). With less safe and available outdoor play spaces, children are less active, spend less time interacting with peers, and have fewer opportunities to learn from outdoor play.

*Technology:* With the invent and advances in technology children are spending more time passively watching and playing on devices and less time engaged in active and creative play and playful interactions. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommended a limit on screen time for children. In fact, their 1999 recommendation was for "No screens before age 2." Since then the recommendation was updated, but it continues to say no screens are the best idea for very young children. However, exceptions were added for "facetime" and other virtual screen visits, such as Skype time with grandparents or other family friends.

Understanding how social change has impacted children's play is an important consideration when exploring solutions. Just as these changes have evolved over time, solutions will also take time. Yet, sharing information about the value of play while also understanding the complex demands parents face are good steps for promoting children's play and playful interactions.

Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics* (119/ 1). Accessed from: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/119/1/182>



# Consultation Corner

From February through July 2017 we are excited to have

**Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak** as our Consultation Corner expert. During this series Kristie will address a variety of questions that will help us *Authentically Explore Children's Play*.

Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak is a revolutionary speaker, researcher, and play advocate. Through podcasts, blogs, free resources, and trainings, Kristie inspires and supports early educators in revolutionizing their teaching. Kristie spent 16 years, as faculty, at Kent State University and now trains and coaches early educators worldwide. Kristie is a Past President of the Division for Early Childhood and works with intentness and determination to sort through the clutter and chaos to join seemingly disparate ideas. She also aims to celebrate differences and shared attributes to achieve solutions. You can access her latest solutions at <http://kristiepf.com>.

**Q: What is the developmental progression or the sophistication levels of children's play?**

A: There are many famous theorists who have shared their thoughts on the stages of play. You can easily GOOGLE "play milestones" or "play theorists" to learn more about the different stage of play. For me, however, since I work with children with diverse abilities, it is often easier to think of things not in fixed stages, but along a progression or continuum. Meaning, regardless of culture, philosophical orientation, or approach to early development and learning, children's play tends to move from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract, and from egocentric to hopefully and eventually, world-centric.

**Q: How do children learn to make sense of the things with which they play?**

A: Throughout the lifespan, but critically important in the first years of life, is our ability to get information through our senses. Very young children spend more and more time in an alert state. This allows them to respond to things they see, hear, smell, taste, and of course touch. As they explore and experience things, they begin to learn about cause and effect, the function of objects, roles, and rules, and the

interdependencies and interconnectedness between objects, people, and/or events.

**Q: What are the nuances of children's play? For example, what are they learning when they taste a ball, drop a cup, or push the remote control?**

A: Children are programmed to imitate what they see and hear. Through imitation, they are making neurons fire together, and thus wire together. Very early on, children use their sense of sight, sound, taste, and touch to learn about objects...that's why you've likely noticed that if a baby gets their hands on something, it goes straight to their mouth. They are like really young detectives gathering clues, albeit in a slobbery way at times. As children mature, they begin to use simple and repetitive motor actions on objects (e.g., dumping, patting, banging, throwing, swiping). They find pleasure acting upon something because they are beginning to understand they have a role in the eventual outcome. It's critical, that regardless of age, we allow safe and responsive ways for children to explore using their senses and to engage in simple motor action with objects. Think of sensory exploration and simple motor actions as prerequisites to more advanced things like imaginary and cooperative play.



## On the WWW

Following our current KIT series theme, this web resource is also about children's play. The host site is [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org), which is a site from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The following link provides a parent-friendly overview of the importance of play and offers functional tips parents can try with their child.

- <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/fitness/Pages/Playing-is-How-Toddlers-Learn.aspx>

Another helpful link is titled "Caution! Children at Play! This link further discusses the value of play, and playtime helps children learn and helps build strong parent-child bonds.

- <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/fitness/Pages/Caution-Children-at-Play.aspx>

The home site includes a helpful search feature, allowing you to search a variety of play and other topics.



## Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

In line with the focus on *Authentically Exploring Children's Play*, readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (February through June 2017) and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam in July 2017. There is no need to register for the CEUs. Rather, if you are interested complete the exam online at [www.edis.army.mil](http://www.edis.army.mil)

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

KIT Newsletters  
are available  
online at  
[www.edis.army.mil](http://www.edis.army.mil)

Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.

