



# The State of Play in America

**A Special Report by The Genius of Play™**

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Play is more than just fun and games—it is essential for children to reach healthy physical, cognitive, social, and emotional developmental milestones. Although play may seem simple, when kids are playing they are involved in a sophisticated scientific and evolutionary process that is an important part of growing up. Play provides children with the skills needed to interact positively with others, manage emotions, make sense of the world around them, and go on to be happy and successful adults. In fact, play is so important to child development that the UN High Commission for Human Rights has recognized it as the right of every child.

## America's Play Problem

While experts continue to make a powerful argument for the importance of play in children's lives, the actual time children spend playing continues to decrease.

Although U.S. data on time spent in play vs. other activities is limited, research by experts at the University of Michigan suggests there was a 25 percent decline in time spent playing among six- to eight-year-olds between 1981 and 1997, the last year for which U.S. statistics are available. Time spent in outdoor play seems to be particularly threatened<sup>1</sup>.

**“Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength.”**

**-American Academy of Pediatrics**

*Source: American Academy of Pediatrics. 2006. The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds.*

[www.app.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf](http://www.app.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf)

Crowded and overly structured schedules, competitive parenting culture, diminishing recess in schools, and increasing screen time are some of the key reasons behind this decline in play. To address these challenges and provide guidance to parents and caregivers, The Genius of Play, whose mission is to raise awareness about the vital role of play in child development, convened a panel of experts at the Children's Museum of Manhattan in Spring 2017.

## Introducing the Panelists

**Nancy Schulman** was the director of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y Nursery for more than 20 years, and in 2011 moved on to become the head of the Early Learning Center at Avenues: The World School. Schulman is also the co-author of *Practical Wisdom for Parents: Demystifying the Preschool Years* (Knopf). She received a B.S. in elementary education from Syracuse University and an M.A. in early childhood and elementary education from New York University.

Playworks' **Kim McCall** helps the nonprofit support learning and physical health by providing safe and inclusive play to low-income students in urban schools. Playworks partners with schools to design curricula and activities that offer play opportunities during recess, lunch, and after school. As the New York/New Jersey executive director, McCall oversees activities in 25 schools in the New York City and Newark areas.

As an emotional dynamics expert, **Dr. Erik Fisher** provides innovative approaches to therapy to families working with children as young as two through adulthood. Play has been an integral part of his work. He has published two books, *The Art of Empowered Parenting: The Manual You Wish Your Kids Came With* and *The Art of Managing Everyday Conflict: Understanding Emotions and Power Struggles*.

A key member of the Children's Museum of Manhattan's education team for 20 years, **Leslie Bushara** has played a lead role in the museum's educational programming. As deputy director of education and guest services at the museum, Bushara works on major initiatives with the NYC Department of Education and Department of Homeless Services. She has led work with the National Institutes of Health to create an early childhood health curriculum. Bushara also serves on the advisory board for the Association of Children's Museums.

Panel moderator **Dana Points** is a veteran journalist, most recently the editor-in-chief of *Parents and Fit Pregnancy and Baby*. She is deeply immersed in the hopes, dreams, finances, work/family balance issues, and child-rearing habits of today's millennial parents. Before joining *Parents*, Points worked as an editor specializing in women's health for more than 15 years.

## Panel Report: The State of Play in America

There is ample research to support the fact that play provides substantial benefits to children from an early age. The Genius of Play has identified six key benefits of play that are crucial to healthy child development: improving cognitive abilities; honing communication skills; increasing creativity; helping process and express emotions; developing physical skills; and enhancing social skills.

### 6 Play Perks



Improves cognitive abilities



Hones communication skills



Increases creativity



Helps process & express emotions



Develops physical abilities



Enhances social skills

Source:  
[www.TheGeniusofPlay.org](http://www.TheGeniusofPlay.org)

In addressing the current state of play in America, moderator Dana Points cited research showing that play is central to healthy social and emotional development: A study by researchers in Germany<sup>2</sup> found a significant correlation between ample free time for play during childhood and adult social success. The study revealed that play helped build self-esteem and flexibility to adjust one's goals, which are important factors in today's working environment. She asked the panelists how they think play contributes to children's growth and development.

#### **Q: How does play contribute to children's growth and development?**

**Nancy Schulman:** "Everything about play benefits kids. Curiosity, inventiveness, self-esteem, and resilience are four

things that kids really get through play. They're actively involved. They're setting their own agenda. No one's telling them how to do it. If you watch children at play, they will try something over and over again and fail at it and fail at it and keep trying, because they're setting the agenda. When I think about children's resilience and what they need in the world, play is one of the elements that can build these skills most effectively. And in school we really see the carryover for children when they have those experiences."

**Kim McCall:** "Play provides additional social and emotional learning that helps kids thrive and succeed, not only in school, but further down the line in life. Recent research<sup>3</sup> following elementary students with strong social and

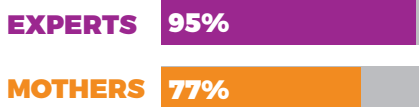
emotional skills showed they are 54 percent more likely to earn a high school diploma, twice as likely to attain a college degree, and 46 percent more likely to have a full-time job by age 25, so we're seeing benefits that really carry over throughout life."

**Leslie Bushara:** "Play really helps with leadership skills, because when you are engaged in play as a child, you're listening, you're negotiating, you're talking. It helps build language skills that are different than when you are with adults. With adults you tend to follow directions or listen more. With your playmates, you're contextualizing the situation. You're building your vocabulary, your ability to negotiate, to play with others. Later on, in the workplace, the people who tend to be successful have leadership skills and can work well with a group."

### Less Time for Play

Despite all the existing evidence on the value of play, there is growing concern about the decrease in time children today spend playing compared to 20 years ago. Some of the culprits seem to be overly structured schedules and extra-curricular activities, increased screen time, and even declining recess in schools.

**More experts than moms agree having time each day to do nothing in particular is important for a child's development.**



Source: Gryfe, Shelly G. 2005. *The power of play: How to change conversation. Study conducted for Fisher-Price by Daniel Yankelovich*

**“Play activates the whole neocortex. Of the 1,200 genes that we measured, about one-third significantly changed simply by having a half-hour of play.”**

**-Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, Ph.D., Washington State University**

NPR interview

**Q: How can today's parents balance the need for play with the pressures of modern life?**

**Nancy Schulman:** "We've seen the outcome of kids who are so over-directed and over-programmed they lose all interest in learning, and don't know what to do unless someone tells them. It's taken over their ability to figure things out on their own."

**Leslie Bushara:** "There is some confusion among parents about the difference between taking kids to play sports at a scheduled time

and just leaving some free time during the day for open-ended play. Parents structure a kid's day with lunch, sports, lessons, and other activities instead of just going to a park to watch them play and observing what happens. People shouldn't be uncomfortable with the notion of letting the day unfold. There have to be spaces and times where it's not directed, where you feel your child is safe and you just watch and see her be sparked by something you weren't aware of as a parent. "

**Dr. Erik Fisher:** "I often work with kids with a number of emotional, communication, social, and educational issues whose parents don't see the value of play. I tell parents, 'It's not what we can teach kids, but what they can teach us.' We learn much more when we interact and play with kids on their terms.

There are several different ways that we can play with kids. We can be an onlooker, a co-player or the stage manager. When I first want to learn more about a child I'm an onlooker, watching to see what the child will do. If we don't understand how our kids are communicating we're missing out. There was some research<sup>4</sup> on directed play, where the teacher demonstrated how to do a certain task. When they gave the same task to kids to figure out for themselves, the second group not only learned how to perform the task, they came up with additional ideas on how to do it. That's why some of the best toys for small children to play with are the simple ones like blocks. They're the things that don't give too much direction and let kids exercise their imaginations."

## How Kids Learn Through Play

Revered pediatrician Benjamin Spock noted that "a child loves his play, not because it's easy, but because it's hard." Experts agree that children learn through play, but often our idea of traditional play involves time spent with games or toys. Not all play is structured, and not all play is the same. Kids may take part in active play, cooperative play, solitary play, creative play, and more in a single afternoon, with and without actual toys.

### **Q: What role do toys have in play?**

**Nancy Schulman:** "I like the expression that a toy should be 90 percent kid and 10 percent toy. If there's only one way to play with it, it's not a very good toy, because the child does not have to do anything or think about things in a different way. Any kind of open-ended situation or material is where you're going to see kids' thought processes, problem solving, and all the kinds of things that they have to put into it to make a determination about what happens."

**Leslie Bushara:** “We’re seeing many parents looking for toys to calm their child. If a toy has directions or steps, they’re somehow feeling that that’s a better toy. While a child might be frustrated with a toy, that’s fine, because they have to figure out how to use it. It’s also okay for kids to be bored sometimes. We’re so used to rules or following steps, what about leaving time for your child’s mind to wander?”

**Kim McCall:** “We keep things very basic: One of our best toys is a piece of chalk!”

## A Report Card for Grownups

Most children score an A in play—just watch kids in the playground to see how easily they adapt to virtually any situation. But experts say that parents and educators still have some homework to do when it comes to assessing the value of play and differentiating between unstructured play and instruction in dance, sports, and other activities.

### Q: If you were to give America a grade on play, what would it be?

**Nancy Schulman:** “I would give different grades for different things. Children get an A because it’s inherent to know how to play, but adults get a C when they get in the way. As an advocate for children, I need to help parents and schools understand that enrolling children in a program to learn a particular skill is really not the same thing as letting kids play. The pressure that parents are feeling about making sure their kids are getting the best education and training so that they can achieve is actually counterproductive to the good emotional, social, and skill-based kind of understanding you get through play.”

**Dr. Erik Fisher:** “Across the board, we’re (as a society) pretty average, in the C-range. Kids would do much better if we got out of their way.

The difficulty in the U.S. education system seems to be the belief that more is better. The more class time instruction, the more kids learn. If this is the case, then why are students in the U.S. not excelling relative to other countries? According to one study<sup>5</sup> the value of frequent breaks (10 minutes every 40-50 minutes) is supported by extensive experimental evidence. Most East Asian school systems require such breaks as a matter of policy, while research has found a link between recess and cognitive performance in the form of increased attention, motivation, and engagement. Experimental research previously conducted found that children—particularly boys—were much more attentive after recess (both indoor and outdoor) than they were before recess

periods, and that children were less attentive when there were longer periods before recess. This is important to keep in mind as we consider how students may really learn best.”

## America's Play Report Card

How do parents and educators score when it comes to encouraging children's play?

Schulman: **C**

Bushara: **B**

Fisher: **C**

McCall: **C-**

**GPA: C**

**Leslie Bushara:** “I think there’s an A for effort because there are a lot of great people working on the issue of play, but I would say we’re at a B. We’re moving up but we have work to do. Play is the work of childhood; it’s a strategy for learning. Without it, kids don’t get the foundation for learning and we’re failing them.

In New York City, we’ve done a good job of helping our parks, but not every borough has really safe parks for kids. There is great stress among parents with young children to get them into good programs. We’re seeing reduced recess, and often recess is spent learning games or steps. Understanding rules and following instructions, even when you’re being physical, uses a different part of your brain. When kids are allowed to just have free play and roam around, it activates a more creative part of the brain.”

**Kim McCall:** “There’s no clearly defined, accepted definition, but by all accounts we might not be doing a very good job of giving kids the playtime

they need. So, I would give maybe a C minus. Only a quarter of our kids ages 6 to 15 are getting the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity every day, which is disappointing. We need to highlight the importance of recess during the school day. In New York City, we’ve seen a cutback of recess because of testing, and because of violence that may occur. Some schools are afraid to have it; some schools take it away as punishment for poor behavior, which is unfortunate, because we know that kids need that critical playtime to be free and have that release. Then they go back to class eager and ready to dive back in.”

### Screens vs. Swings: The Role of Tech

Today’s children are the first generation who won’t recall a time when technology, in the form of phones, computers, tablets, and apps, wasn’t part of daily life. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, evidence suggests that digital, interactive, and social media offer both benefits and risks to the

health of children and teens. Some of the benefits are early learning and exposure to new ideas and knowledge. Risks include negative health effects on sleep, attention, and learning.

**Q: How can parents weigh the advantages and disadvantages of technology and decide how to best exert some control over its role in children's lives?**

**Dr. Erik Fisher:** "We're living in an emerging technology world—it's not going away. Technology can be a great tool for teaching. It's a matter of being aware that we cannot keep it from them, so we need to guide the process and the learning, giving them the time to explore. Technology can become an addiction because of the way it interacts with and affects the brain, so balance is key."

**Nancy Schulman:** "Parents need to be able to set limits with technology, just as we do with everything else. A parent at a recent meeting actually raised her hand, and said, 'Is there an app for turning off the iPad?' I said, 'Yes, in fact, there is. It's free, and it's called being a parent.' You take it away, and you put it on a really, really high shelf, and you don't give it back until you say this is the amount of time you can have it. It's just setting limits and taking charge and being a parent and not being afraid to say 'no' to a child who is obsessed with something and won't turn off unless there's a limit set around it."

Parents can be role models in how to use technology in a responsible way. I've explained to parents that when you are looking at your phone or reading your

## Emotional Scheduling: Do Kids Know Best?

At the core of the theory of emotional scheduling is the multi-dimensional nature of children's choices for entertainment and play. The time of day correlates with what a child has been doing or is about to be doing, which influences his emotional state and needs. Intersecting with this are location, time available, and who else is with them.

Within that complex matrix, children make both content and "platform" choices and there are indications that children's play between the digital and the physical space is blurring. Often, play is linked between the two. A child may be watching a "Paw Patrol" episode on a tablet, then pause it to go get a Paw Patrol toy, and continue playing while watching the episode.

There seem to be particular times that are more conducive to outdoor play, or when it's more practical and satisfying to pick up a toy than a tablet. While there is no hard data, it may be that after school hours, when primary school-age children have more free time to dive deep, lend themselves to building play or hobby pursuits. Early weekday mornings only allow room for "snacking," so small children choose short form videos that can be easily interrupted or toys and games they can play with and put aside quickly when it's time to leave for pre-school.

Source:  
**David Kleeman**  
SVP of Global Trends  
"Dubit Trends"



email and your child is talking to you, they have no idea that they're being listened to unless there's eye contact involved. And even though you know you're listening, they don't feel it from you. Being a good role model in the way we use technology is as important as what they're doing with technology."

**Leslie Bushara:** "Technology doesn't have to mean that the conversation stops, that when kids are watching TV or on their phones we can't talk to them. There can be a continuation of conversation around that technology, about the characters they like, bringing them to life as part of family conversation. For example, if your teenager is into Snapchat, you can show some interest in some of the pictures he takes. When we try to compartmentalize technology is when we get into trouble."

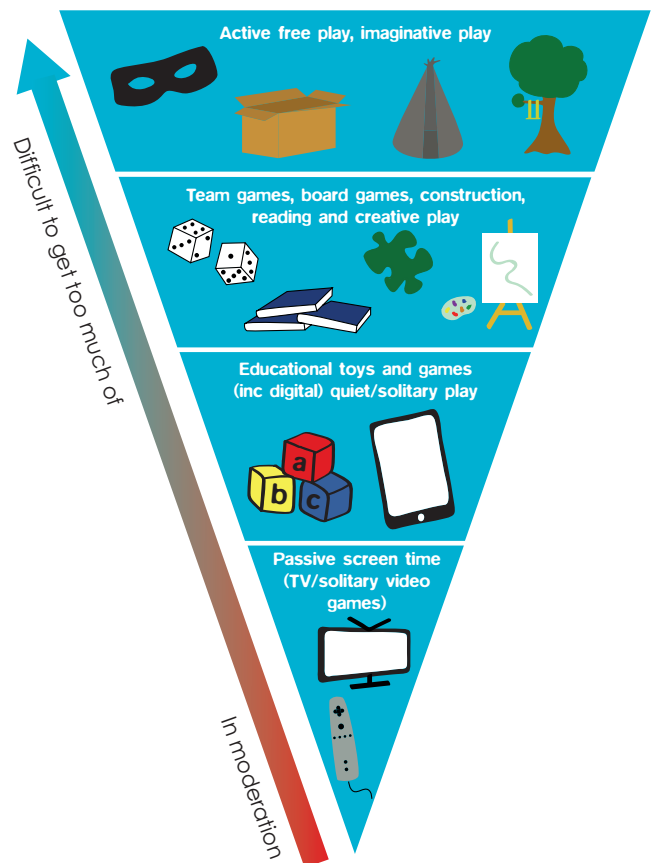
### Achieving the Right Balance of Play

Each different type of play will support children's development with diverse types of skills. The unlimited types of play, including structured and unstructured play, outdoor play, role play, group play or solo play all have a role in child development. While afterschool activities like gymnastics or swimming lessons also play a part, kids need time every day to be free to create their own world of play.

**Q: What are the key elements of a balanced diet of play, and how can parents ensure they are part of their children's daily lives at home and at school?**

**Dr. Erik Fisher:** "If we look at The Genius of Play's list of the attributes of play, there's creative, cognitive, communication, emotional, physical, and social. Those are six key areas to look at in finding a balance of play. But it shouldn't be too complex. We need to tell parents not to worry about perfect balance—there is no perfect balance—that will depend on your child."

Dr. Amanda Gummer and Lucy Gill address the balance of play through a play pyramid.



Source:  
[www.FundamentallyChildren.com](http://www.FundamentallyChildren.com)

**Nancy Schulman:** “Each child likes to play in certain ways. For example, they might always be the princess and play imaginary games. I tell parents to try to mix it up and get involved. If your child always plays princesses, bring some princes into the game or combine it with a block-building element. You want to give your children opportunities to do a bit of all of those things—it’s play as cross-training.”

**About half of preschoolers don’t have even one parent-supervised outdoor play opportunity per day, according to a 2012 study of almost 9,000 nationally representative U.S. families. Girls and non-white children were especially at risk.**

-Seattle Children’s Research Institute  
and University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

### **Safety vs. Freedom to Fail**

Parents have a natural concern for their children’s safety, despite data showing that kids in the U.S. are safer today than ever<sup>6</sup>. When is it time to back off and trust kids to use their own judgment? Experts found that children spend only about half as much time outdoors today as their parents did when they were the same age, and in the U.S. only about half of children go outside to walk or play once a day.

**Q: Some parental anxiety is natural, but how can parents encourage kids to develop their own coping skills?**

**Nancy Schulman:** “Parents are really anxious. I’ve seen the anxiety level of parents over the past 20 years increase so dramatically, partially for good reasons and also for reasons that are imagined. I think it has to do with the 24/7 news cycle, which elevates anxiety.

It’s important to find places where a parent can feel like children are safe. Schools and community centers and religious spaces exist where kids can go and feel a sense of community. Schools now function a lot like the sort of small town center where everybody knew each other and would know where kids were all the time. It’s also about being able to let go at some point and let your children figure out for themselves what they feel competent and aware and safe to do. Fear is pragmatic at times. Fear lets us know when to protect ourselves or the people around us. But when we let it take over and run our life that becomes a problem.

There is also value in solitary play, being able to just be by yourself and find something interesting to do and stay with it for a while. For little kids who are always being supervised, back off a little when they're engaged. They need that solitary time sometimes to sort it out or even do nothing. As a parent you will want them to be able to do homework independently later on and not always need an adult presence to take them to the next step."

**Dr. Erik Fisher:** "It's harder to let kids roam on their own these days but that's where kids learn independence, competence, confidence, and success. We have some realistic issues to address and teach our kids problem-solving skills which help them make better decisions, but we need to make sure that we know where they are and give them certain parameters in terms of giving them space and trusting their judgement."

**Kim McCall:** "We all want our kids to feel safe, engaged, and empowered when they play. But we're dealing with limited space in cities and metro areas. It's being creative with how we use space and giving tools and techniques for educators to be able to activate play in available spaces in a safe way. It's not about structure, but providing some organization to a recess yard so a game of football doesn't get into the way of a Double Dutch game. We work hard at putting that kind of organization in place and then allowing kids free choice on how they spend their time during recess, whether it's inside or outside."

**Leslie Bushara:** "In a big city, it's hard to let your kids out because it's not just fear of abductions, it's crossing the street, taxi cabs, crowds. We need to be careful, but we don't want them to be afraid. If you're raising a child in the city they need to understand how to navigate the city."

## Parents' Role in Play

American parents are now spending more time with their kids than any previous generation. Yet they still have questions on the best ways to incorporate play into family life.

### **Q: Is there a "right" way to play?**

**Nancy Schulman:** "There is no right way to play. Let kids lead, otherwise it's your agenda, not theirs. Start with something you enjoy doing, not because you're supposed to but because it's fun, like being outside or playing ball. If you think about what's fun for you and them it will flow, without worrying about doing it right."

**Dr. Erik Fisher:** “We can teach parents how to pool together to create play groups where they’re not just supervising or looking on, but actively engaged.”

**Kim McCall:** “Just being present plays a significant role. It’s important to have a caring, consistent adult in a child’s life. We sometimes underestimate how much kids want to play with us. They want to know you, and when you’re excited about something, like cooking or painting, or crafts, share it with them. It doesn’t mean you’re directing the child, just opening the door to a new experience and then letting them take the lead and seeing if it leads to something else.”

### Calling All Parents

Parents are faced with dozens of decisions every day, from monitoring their kids’ health, education, and safety to deciding how best to teach them the social, communication, and cognitive skills they will need all their lives. Play, in all its forms, from a simple game of catch to building a blanket fort or creating an imaginary world with dolls, has been shown to help build those skills, creating happier, healthier, and more successful children.

While play is sometimes erroneously dismissed as empty time, The Genius of Play, along with many other child-focused organizations and educators, has evidence that it is one of the most important elements of learning and development. The Genius of Play works to help parents meet child-rearing challenges by providing current expert information and opinion, accessible play ideas, and other resources.

Resources for Parents  
[www.TheGeniusofPlay.org](http://www.TheGeniusofPlay.org)

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