



The WCPA News

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Letting Kids Be Kids: The Importance of Play

Written by Ramey Katz, MSW

The United Nations has proclaimed play as a universal and unalienable right of childhood. However, our schools today are faced with a tremendous amount of pressure to limit free play and recess time in order to meet increasingly high academic standards. This pressure comes from both our current culture of hyper-focus on young academic learning and from the Federal Standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools across the country are feeling the demand to prepare their students at an ever earlier age to read and to do well on the various achievement tests. As a result, this demand leads school administrators to have to make a very difficult decision. Educators may ponder, "Should I let the students have free time to play? Or, should I spend extra time on academic preparation?" In today's culture, teachers and administrators may opt to spend more time on rigorous academic preparation than on free time for play. Unfortunately, this decision can have negative consequences. This is because play produces a variety of important benefits to children's development.

When discussing the benefits of play, it is important to understand the different types of play. The most developmentally beneficial type of play is Unstructured Play (also known as free play.) Simply put, this means that the play is "child-directed" rather than "adult-directed." The student chooses the activities or toys with which he or she would like to play. The student is able to utilize his or her imagination and also to create the rules. Structured Play, on the other hand, means that the teacher or parent chooses the activity or toy for the child, and may tell the child what to do or say during this time. Today's culture shows an increasing preference for structured play, as children participate in sports programs rather than playing neighborhood ball, are enrolled in gyms and classes instead of playing in the backyard, and have supervised play groups and play dates instead of simply going to a neighbor's house to play.

Many studies have shown that free play enhances children's development on four different levels. Play has social, emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits for children. Socially, play has been shown to help children learn the skills of cooperation, teamwork, empathy and sharing. Emotionally, play increases adaptability, resilience, and the skills to deal with change. Cognitively, play has been shown to improve brain functioning, and to help the brain develop new pathways. This helps to create opportunities for learning, comprehension, and problem-solving. Playing also allows a student to develop creativity and imagination. Research has shown that children who have unstructured play time show a greater increase in concentration, which is a critical skill to master at an early age in the realm of today's academics. Finally, play clearly has physical benefits for children, through improving motor skills, decreasing stress levels, and combating the risk of childhood obesity.

A study conducted by the Canadian Council on Learning found that there is also a positive relationship between play and literacy skills. The study found that there is strong evidence to support that increasing opportunities for play can have a positive influence on literacy development. The study explained that pretend play with peers helps children to engage in the same kind of representational thinking that is needed in early literacy activities. When children have the opportunity to engage in this type of play, they are able to develop complex narratives, link objects, actions, and

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

The new school year is beginning and I wonder how many of us, educators and/or parents, have the frightening sense that we're entering into another year and we've not recovered from the previous one. We all look forward to the lazy days of summer when we dream about slowing down and then, mysteriously, we realize that it's over – and there was no slowing down. There were still more activities than we had time for. There is still the sense that we're not going to get these projects done before we go back. Sometimes, we sense that we still need more time for ourselves – and we haven't gotten it. What creates this sense of harriedness and frustration? Simply, the answer for me is that we want to do too much and, most importantly, we don't set priorities in terms of what is reasonable and what is not reasonable. We often overestimate the amount that we can accomplish to the point that it would be impossible to complete the tasks that we had planned. Therefore, everything in our life feels rushed. Sadly, we too often fail to appreciate what we are experiencing at the moment. Our thoughts are directed toward what we have to be doing in the future.

Perhaps we shouldn't be waiting for summer in order to catch up. Perhaps we should be planning wisely now so that we are not always living in a state of being anxious and rushed. I believe that we can accomplish this if we remember to: be realistic about what we are able to do, overestimate the time that a project will take so that we have time left over, eliminate the non-essentials – the things that we really don't have to do, and make a conscious choice of doing those activities that we want to do. Lastly, we need to enjoy and appreciate what we are doing at the moment. Each activity brings its own joy. This creates a sense of balance and well-being in us. This should be a daily experience – not one that we leave for summer.

- *Mary*

Fall Seminar at WCPA – Open to All Education Professionals

Anxiety in Students

Monday, November 10, 2008 9 a.m. to Noon \$35 per attendee Presented by Amy Maus, MSW, LCSW
Continental Breakfast Provided

Schools now regularly serve students who have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders, in numbers and severity that simply weren't seen a generation ago. School professionals today must become prepared to understand and respond to students suffering from wide array of anxiety-related problems. Topics covered will include: Generalized Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD,) Panic Attacks, Social Anxiety (including Selective Mutism,) and Separation Anxiety. Space is limited – you may call the WCPA office to register, phone number (314) 275-8599.

Our Philosophy

We believe that individuals and systems:

- Are capable of permanent change
- Function best with clearly defined authority that stems from a family systems hierarchy
- Are accountable for both positive and negative aspects of behavior
- Achieve success by conscious choices that lead to strength and development of personal responsibility
- Control their environment by establishing boundaries that are consistent with their values

WCPA promotes change and growth by:

- Helping to establish order within the environment
- Meeting consistently in a collaborative relationship to achieve identified goals
- Helping to identify and process significant issues
- Aiding in resolving issues as they arise

The result for the system or individual is the development of a strong sense of identity and boundaries that allows for the achievement of goals.

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language together in combinations and develop narrative sequencing. This type of play also helps children to expand their language skills, and to be creative at the same time.

From birth to about the age of eleven or twelve, children learn about the world around them through play. Research has proven consistently through the years that regular opportunities for free play can help children to:

- **Develop the Skill of “Self-Talk:”** Self-talk refers to a child’s ability to carry on conversations in his or her mind, which is shown to help develop skills of problem-solving and perseverance. By encouraging our students to play freely forces them to be creative and learn how to entertain themselves when they become bored. Some children choose to have an “imaginary friend.” This is important in helping them to develop problem solving skills, as they are the ones directing the actions and making decisions for their “imaginary friend.”
- **Like and Accept Themselves:** Children who are able to play freely and direct their own play generally like who they are, which helps to develop a more positive self-concept.
- **Succeed Academically:** Research has proven that there is indeed a link between play and our students’ cognitive development. Activities such as jumping or skipping create neural pathways in the brain, which serve as a benefit when your student has to memorize new information such as math facts or spelling words.
- **Grow Socially and Emotionally:** Imaginative and make-believe play gives a child the opportunity to practice social roles. Even more importantly, play helps children to develop empathy, impulse control, and skills of cooperation. In the school setting, recess is a wonderful time to observe how children interact with one another. Recess can help teachers and other staff identify any issues with bullying, social skills, or social isolation.
- **Develop Executive Function (Self-Regulation):** One of the most important skills that free play can offer children is what is termed executive function (also known as self-regulation). Executive function can be described as a set of cognitive abilities that control and regulate other behaviors and abilities. The ability to self-regulate is essential for goal-directed behavior. Self-regulation helps one to stop and initiate actions (Impulse Control), and to monitor or change behavior as needed (e.g. listening to instructions given by the teacher or parents.)

In closing, play is an essential component of childhood that will help children to develop a variety of skills needed to succeed in life. While academic and extracurricular activities are important, it is at least equally important that every student receive an adequate amount of time to freely play. The benefits of free play abound. As educators and as parents, it is our responsibility to encourage and enhance our children’s social, emotional and cognitive development. We can do this by providing children with a variety of opportunities to play by themselves, with siblings, and with friends from school.

Ramey Katz, MSW specializes in providing therapy to children and teens ages three through eighteen. She has a broad range of experience in working with issues surrounding trauma, abuse, grief/loss, anxiety, family dysfunction, behavioral concerns, ADHD, crisis management, and attachment, in mental health, school, and child welfare settings. Ms. Katz offers on-site school observation/consultation, parenting and social skills training, and therapy for children, adolescents, and families.

Winter Seminars at WCPA – Open to All Education Professionals

Motivating the Unmotivated Student Presented by Mary Fitzgibbons, Ph.D. Date: To be announced.

In this seminar, we will look at the numerous causes as to why so many of today’s children seem academically unmotivated. There will be a discussion of how Locus of Control determines success for a student and the factors necessary to develop an Internal Locus of Control that insures future success. We will address the teacher’s, parent’s and student’s responsibilities in motivation. A specific step-by-step Model to Motivate Students will be presented.

Families in Chaos Presented by Mary Saggau, MSW, LCSW January 15, 2009 8:00 – 10:00 a.m. \$25

Families with alcoholism, other addictions, sexual abuse, chronic illness (and the list goes on) develop coping patterns that aren’t healthy or beneficial for the children. This workshop discusses common family patterns and how to identify the roles that children play. Ways that teachers can intervene to improve self-esteem and functioning will be explored, along with suggestions for schools as they maintain appropriate boundaries with these families. Questions and discussion encouraged.



For Parents Only:
Quality Time with Our Children
Ramey Katz, MSW

It is a well known fact that, for those with children, being a parent is the most important job one will have in life. However, balancing work and family life can and does often present a challenge in today's society. Between getting home from work and school, soccer practice, music lessons, Scouts, homework, bath time and bedtime, where is there time anymore to just be together as a family? Fortunately, there are many easy activities that can have a positive impact on our relationships with our children. When we have a limited quantity of time to spend with our children, it becomes ever more important to ensure the quality of that time spent together. There are a number of activities that can be done with our children that do not require a lot of time and are very rewarding for all involved. Here are a few suggestions that require little time or money:

- **Play with Our Children:** Let your child lead the way and tell you what to do and say with toys or activities that they choose. So often, our children are used to having everything from school to after school activities structured for them. This type of free play allows our children to be in control and promotes bonding. Playing with your child and being "in the moment" with them shows him or her that you are there and really enjoy spending time with them.
- **Read a Story:** Read a story to your child, or if your child can read, take turns reading to one another. Use variations in your tone of voice. This often makes children laugh and stay interested in what you are saying. Let your child choose the books – even if this means reading comic books together!
- **Play a Game:** Playing a game together is a great way to help your child learn self-regulation skills, such as waiting for his or her turn, and the importance of playing fair. Games that encourage self-regulation are as simple as Simon Says or Red Light! Green Light! These are great fun for children and also promote listening skills that are essential at home and in school. Simple board games, from UNO to Connect Four, work great for older children too.
- **Eat Dinner Together:** Eating dinner together as a family has been proven in research, time and time again, to be a stronger predictor of academic achievement and psychological adjustment than time spent in school, studying, sports, religious activities or art activities. If your family can't have dinner together every night, do so as often as you can. Make sure that when your family eats together you turn off the T.V. and radio, and converse about everyone's day. This not only makes a real difference for family relationships, but for your child's social skills, too.

- **Limit Children to One or Two Activities Per Season:** In today's world, we sometimes feel that our children must be exposed to various activities such as soccer, dance, girl/boy scouts, football, gymnastics, music lessons, church groups, baseball... the list goes on and on. While all of these activities are great for children's development, they can also lead to over-scheduling. Over-scheduling creates feelings of anxiety for parents, children and educators – but we can alleviate this anxiety for ourselves and our children by making sure we leave some free time for play and family togetherness. By limiting your child's extra-curricular activities, you will be promoting more time spent together as a family, and strengthening the bond between all members.

As we all know, many parents today struggle balancing work and family life. However, there are many benefits to finding that “happy medium” between the two. Hopefully, the above mentioned activities can help. By taking time to do fun activities as a family, you are not only increasing the bonding between all members, but you are giving your children memories that they will cherish for a lifetime. In addition, you are teaching your child the importance of family and closeness that they will hopefully carry on to their children in the years to come. As Richard L. Lewis once said, “Children will not remember you for the material things you provided but for the feeling that you cherished them.”

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Groups Available at West County Psychological Associates this Fall

Children in Transition Support Group

This group will be offered to children who are currently beginning 2nd through 6th grade, who have parents that are separated, divorcing or already divorced. This group will discuss topics such as: Why parents marry and divorce, children's perception of household changes, custody and visitation, simple legal terms, step-parents, and understanding happy marriages.

Children in Transition will run 10 consecutive weeks. The cost for participation will be \$30.00 per session, with a ten week commitment. Class size is limited. Please contact Jennifer Bannister, MSW at the WCPA office for more information or to schedule an initial interview.

Social Skills Group

This group is open to children ages 7-10, who would benefit from a supportive and encouraging environment in which to practice social skills with similar-aged peers. Students who have difficulty making friends, who are shy, who experience bullying, or who are diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder can benefit greatly from ongoing social skills training and support.

The Social Skills Group will run 8 consecutive weeks. The cost for participation is \$30 per session, with an eight week commitment. Group size is limited. If interested or for more information, please call Ramey Katz, MSW, to schedule an initial interview.

West County Psychological Associates is pleased
to announce the publication of

**The Care Team Approach:
A Problem-Solving Process for
Effective School Change**

Written by Mary Fitzgibbons, Amy Maus and Michael Mahon

Teaching is not for the weak.

Today's societal and familial issues impact the classroom as never before.
Educators must respond appropriately to these issues, or schools fail.

THE CARE TEAM APPROACH provides step-by-step instructions for creating a Care Team that makes a real difference in the lives of students and teachers alike. This book covers how to avoid the pitfalls that historically have plagued these teams, making them ineffective. In addition, it provides comprehensive information upon which team members must be trained in order to become successful.

Currently available for purchase on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)