



Playing: It's not for kids anymore

Dr. Satterwhite

Dear GREENWOOD Family,

One of my deepest sorrows has been the gradual erosion of true "play" for children in the 21st century. I was reminded of this last month when I heard a report on National Public Radio (NPR) about the value of creative, imaginative play for children. According to the report entitled, "Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills," researchers have found that over the last 50 years "playing" for children has moved from make-believe games ("Let's play pretend!") and make-believe toys (using a stick for a gun, for instance) to scheduled 'adult-like' activities (soccer, karate, dance, etc...) and toys that serve a highly particular function (guns that are noise-making lasers or dolls that talk).

Studies indicate that playing make-believe actually helps children develop a critical cognitive skill known as 'executive function.' Executive function includes the ability to plan things out, to self-regulate emotions and behaviors, and to resist impulses.

Not only is poor self-regulation and executive function associated with high drop-out rates, drug use and crime, but these qualities are also better predictors of success in school than a child's IQ.

Research supports that **children cannot 'attend' to something** or self-regulate like they used to be able to do.

Here is an excerpt from the article found at NPR:

We know that children's capacity for self-regulation has diminished. A recent study replicated a study of self-regulation first done in the late 1940s, in which psychological researchers asked kids ages 3, 5 and 7 to do a number of exercises.

One of those exercises included standing perfectly still without moving. The 3-year-olds couldn't stand still at all, the 5-year-olds could do it for about three minutes, and the 7-year-olds could stand pretty much as long as the researchers asked. In 2001, researchers repeated this experiment. But, psychologist Elena Bodrova at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning says, the results were very different.

"Today's 5-year-olds were acting at the level of 3-year-olds 60 years ago, and today's 7-year-olds were barely approaching the level of a 5-year-old 60 years ago," Bodrova explains. "So the results were very sad."

I worry about how little children are allowed to be bored and, thus, be forced to think of something to do, without that activity being watching TV or playing on the computer or a video game. When our oldest children, who are now 18 and 20 years old, were little and either fighting or tugging on us saying, "I'm bored," I would put them in time out until they "thought of something acceptable to me to do." It was amazing how quickly they said, "Let's go outside and play," or "I think I'll go read."

It is unfortunate how our children's world has changed. No longer is it seen as safe to send kids outside to play unsupervised or to let them ride their bikes to the playground without an adult present. **Instead, everything is adult-monitored.** Seldom do kids play pick-up sports/games in the back yard, changing the rules to make the teams fair and, thus, the game fun, and **allowing them to work out their own conflicts** (Was the ball really out? Did she really get tagged? Should we change the teams to make it more even?) Instead, we pay money (often

more than \$1,000) and sign them up for sports and leagues where we press adult rules – complete with paid officials -- down upon them, **and then we WATCH their every play, see their every mistake, and even yell 'advice' at them from the sidelines.** Even the time when imagination (or reading or singing) was all one had on long car trips, now these times are filled with watching a DVD in the mini-van.

When do our children learn to think?

What can a parent do? The single most important thing is to LIMIT television, videos, and computer use to a minimum, especially during the week. In our house, we have had a rule that there is "no TV during the week." The same is true for video games. Once the children get older, say high school, you can relax that a little, if they are doing well in school and aren't excessively using media. When people ask me, "Bill, what is the most important thing I can do to have good kids?" My answer for years has been: "Don't let your kids watch much TV (computer, video) and read to them a lot." That is the first thing.

The second thing is to **encourage free play.**

Let your kids have lots of "un-programmed, unscheduled" time to play.

Send them outside when they are bored and DON'T let them come back in for at least one hour, even if they are whining that "there's nothing to do out here." Aren't there trees to climb or hide behind? Aren't there sticks that can be all kinds of things? Aren't there bugs on the ground to investigate? Aren't there grass and acorns to mix into a stew?

Encourage group free play. Instead of all these parents gathering to watch their kids play an organized soccer game on Saturday morning, meet those same parents and kids on the field and let the kids establish their own rules and teams and play Capture the Flag, while the parents visit with each other and DON'T watch off to the side. Better yet, have all but 2 parents leave the field, and then have parents take turns each week as the "field parent," if safety for the kids is a concern.

I am as guilty as the next parent at violating all the advice I've written above. At different times in the past year our nine-year-old daughter, Anne, will say something like, "No. I don't want to do that this week, because Thursday is my only free day." How awful! A fourth grader only has one 'free day' during the week to play, to imagine, to be a child!

Well, as you can see, I could go on and on about our society (and myself) and how we are suffocating childhood. Paradoxically, we hurry kids on toward adulthood, believing that this makes them into better adults, when in reality the opposite is true:

let them be children longer, particularly in their play, and they will become better adults! Once again, I apologize for the length of this little article; the lawyer in me always gets wordy! Here is the link to NPR. If you go to it and Search for the following titles, you can read a short article on the topic, or listen to the 7-minute radio program.

www.npr.org

Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills

Q & A: The Best Kind of Play