

Excerpted from:

The New York Times

Effort to Restore Children's Play Gains Momentum

By HILARY STOUT

January 5, 2011

...For several years, studies and statistics have been mounting that suggest the culture of play in the United States is vanishing. Children spend far too much time in front of a screen, educators and parents lament — 7 hours 38 minutes a day on average, according to a survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation last year. And only one in five children live within walking distance (a half-mile) of a park or playground, according to a 2010 report by the federal Centers for Disease Control, making them even less inclined to frolic outdoors.

Behind the numbers is adult behavior as well as children's: Parents furiously tapping on their BlackBerrys in the living room, too stressed by work demands to tolerate noisy games in the background. Weekends consumed by soccer, lacrosse and other sports leagues, all organized and directed by parents. The full slate of lessons (chess, tae kwon do, Chinese, you name it) and homework beginning in the earliest grades....

Too little playtime may seem to rank far down on the list of society's worries, but the scientists, psychologists, educators and others who are part of the play movement say that most of the social and intellectual skills one needs to succeed in life and work are first developed through childhood play. Children learn to control their impulses through games like Simon Says, play advocates believe, and they learn to solve problems, negotiate, think creatively and work as a team when they dig together in a sandbox or build a fort with sofa cushions....

Much of the movement has focused on the educational value of play, and efforts to restore recess and unstructured playtime to early childhood and elementary school curriculums. But advocates are now starting to reach out to parents, recognizing that for the movement to succeed, parental attitudes must evolve as well — starting with a willingness to tolerate a little more unpredictability in children's schedules and a little less structure at home....

To try to reach more parents, a coalition called Play for Tomorrow this fall staged what amounted to a giant play date in Central Park. The event, known as the Ultimate Block Party, featured games like I Spy, mounds of Play-Doh, sidewalk chalk, building blocks, puzzles and more. The National Science Foundation was closely involved, advising organizers — and emphasizing to parents — the science and the educational value behind each of the carefully chosen activities. Organizers were hoping to attract 10,000 people to the event. They got more than 50,000. ...They are now working with other cities — Toronto, Atlanta, Baltimore and Houston, among them — to stage similar events, along with making the Central Park gathering an annual one.

The goal, in some ways, is to return to the old days. “When I was growing up, there was a culture of childhood that children maintained,” said Jim Hunn, vice president for mass action at KaBOOM, a nonprofit group that is a leading voice in reducing what it terms the “play deficit”....

There are more formal efforts, in addition to the Ultimate Block Party initiatives. The US Play Coalition, a group of doctors, educators and parks and recreation officials, plans a conference next month at Clemson University on the value of outdoor play. KaBOOM has built 1,900 playgrounds across the country, most in low-income neighborhoods, and in September helped organize “Play Days” in 1,600 communities. It also has added do-it-yourself tools on its Web site to help parents organize and create neighborhood play spaces themselves. Another Web site scheduled to start this spring, LearningResourceNetwork.net, aims to create a broad educational source for parents and teachers.

“Our first big push will be on play,” said Susan Magsamen, the executive director of the group.

An important part of the movement is teaching children themselves how to play. The average 3-year-old can pick up an iPhone and expertly scroll through the menu of apps, but how many 7-year-olds can organize a kickball game with the neighborhood kids?

Toward that end, at the Central Park event, parents were given a 75-page “Playbook” outlining research on play and offering children ideas for playful pursuits — things that generations past did without prompting and that may evoke in today’s parents feelings of recognition and nostalgia.

“Climb on the couch with your friends and pretend you are sailing on a ship to a distant land,” reads one idea. Another, from the section on construction play: “Lay a toy on the floor and figure out how to build a bridge going over the toy with blocks.” “Make paper doll cutouts from old newspapers and magazines,” a third suggests, “and let your imagination fly!”

Read the full article from The New York Times here:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/06/garden/06play.html>