

Changing Times, Changing Play: Promoting Quality Play Today!*

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I have been teaching a course on children's play at Wheelock College for many years. I always have students interview someone over age 50 about their play when they were young. I ask them to compare what they learn with their own play when they were young and with a child they know today. Students are often surprised by what they learn. Parents or grandparents, generally describe playing outside with neighborhood children whenever they had free time, from a very young age. They had few formal toys—maybe a ball and a bicycle, if they were lucky, for outside, and a few board games for inside, with girls having a doll or two and boys having a few cars and trucks, and maybe a small train set.

Very few of my play students know children today who go outside to play in this same way. Instead, they describe children spending most of their free time inside involved with screens, or playing with toys that are realistic replicas of what they see on screens, many of which are highly gender-divided (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales & Alward, 2015).[†] When children do go outside to play now, it is usually either in their own yard, with an adult there to supervise them. Or they participate in organized sports activities with fixed rules, often from a very young age, overseen by adults. And parents often report that their children say they are “bored” when they are told to turn off their screens and play!

Thus, many of today's young children have limited opportunities to engage in the kinds of quality child-created and child-controlled play that promotes optimal development and learning (Linn, 2008). And when I asked experienced teachers about changes they have seen in play since they began teaching, many described children having more difficulty becoming engaged in “free” play now, often needing more structure and direction during playtime, and having shorter attention spans, even when they to get involved in something (Levin, 2013).

Parents can do a lot to help their children become less dependent on screens and more engaged with play in the real world. They can set up specific rituals and routines for when their children can use screens and for which screens they can use. And they can help their children reconnect to the power and excitement of play in the real world by developing rituals and routines for play—and helping them develop real interests and skills in their play.

One of the best ways to get started doing this is not by just handing down dictates about what children can and can't do, but by **creating fun and meaningful play times for the whole family**, so children get excited about play. Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment, an organization I co-founded 25 years ago, has created just the right resource for helping families become engaged in play together. **TRUCE Summer, Fall, Winter and Spring FAMILY PLAY PLANS**[‡] provide a wide range of activities families can play together each season of the year. Once a family gets started there are many ways to branch off, based on the ages, interests and skills of the children. Enjoy!

References

- Levin, D.E. (2013). *Beyond remote-controlled childhood: Teaching young children in the media age*. Wash., DC: National Assoc. for the Education of Young Children.
- Linn, S. (2008). *The case for make believe: Saving play in a commercialized world*. NY, NY: The New Press.
- Van Hoorn, J., Nourot, P.M., Scales, B., & Alward, K.R. (2015). *Play at the center of the curriculum (6th Ed.)*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

* Available at: Defending the Early Years Organization website—www.DEYproject.org

‡ See the “TRUCE Toy and Play Guide” for explanations and listings of recommended toys and toys to avoid— www.truceteachers.org