

education news

in brief

By Ken Schroeder, Managing Editor

Kids Need Play

Too little time for unstructured play leads to increased stress for children and parents, according to a clinical report issued in October by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Nevertheless, many parents and policy makers continue to believe that pressuring young children to learn earlier and faster will help them succeed in school. In fact, it may have just the opposite effect.

Experts say there is a serious disconnect between scientific knowledge of child development and popular ideas about how and when to introduce formal instruction, according to the nonprofit Alliance for Childhood organization. Parental pressure, combined with flawed policies, are among the reasons why creative play, long considered the foundation of the early childhood curriculum, is now disappearing from preschools and kindergartens, says Alliance President Joan Almon.

A recent Public Agenda survey, for example, found a huge divergence of opinion between teachers and parents about the amount of testing children are subjected to: 71% of teachers think there are too many standardized tests,

but only 17% of parents think so.

"Teachers know that imaginative play is the way young children discover the world for themselves and become lifelong learners," says Almon. "But misguided policies that require increasing amounts of formal instruction—and even scripted teaching—are forcing teachers in kindergartens and preschools to do things that they know are wrong and counterproductive. In too many schools, play has become a four-letter word."

Many experts in child development link the increased pressure on young children and the decline of play to later school failure. A "Call to Action on the Education of Young Children," issued by the Alliance for Childhood and signed by more than 150 leading educators, physicians, and other experts, calls for a reversal of education policies that cut time for child-initiated play and emphasize formal instruction.

"We are deeply concerned that current trends in early education, fueled by political pressure, are leading to an emphasis on unproven methods of academic instruction and unreliable standardized testing that can undermine learning and damage young children's healthy development," the Alliance state-

ment says. "Preschool education must not follow the same path that has led kindergartens toward intense academic instruction with little or no time for child-initiated learning. If such practices were effective for five-year-olds, we would have seen better long-term results by now.

"Justified concern for low-income children has been a powerful force behind the current over-emphasis on early instruction in literacy and math," the statement continues. "This well-intentioned but misguided policy may actually put children at increased risk of school failure by denying them positive early learning experiences."

"At a meeting last week with the New York City early education department, I heard the cry of professionals who believe that unrealistic new preschool standards and assessments might push children over the edge," says Temple University Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. "There was actually an initiative to remove blocks from preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Perhaps policy makers do not know that play with blocks builds the foundation for mathematics, language skills, and spatial development."

Psychologist Jane Healy said that the Alliance's call to action is "important for all children, but especially for those disadvantaged by inadequate living conditions, stressed parents, too much televi-

sion, and violent neighborhoods. They, most of all, need a childhood of which they are being deprived."

Alliance president Almon says she hopes that the new report by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) will go a long way toward educating parents and policy makers about the central importance of play in healthy development and dispelling the widespread but false idea that play is a waste of time.

"The AAP has done children and families a great service with this report," says Almon. "When children play, family life is enriched and children learn more deeply. Everyone concerned with the well-being of children should read the report and take it to heart."

Combatant Kids?

A school district in Texas that is training its students to fight back against an attacker is being applauded by a university professor who published *Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism*.

Charles Smith, professor of family studies and human service at Kansas State University's College of Human Ecology, says "Finally somebody is really looking at this and saying, 'Don't be a lamb.' It's telling kids to keep their heads up and to defend themselves with a sense of honor and self-respect."

Smith said fighting back and fighting for your life is a message that's been delivered to adults as a

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