

Play is Declining, and so is Teen Mental Health

I was lucky to grow up in the 80s. It was probably the last decade where kids had the sort of freedom that I had. With every decade since, children have become more restricted, less able to play and explore in their neighbourhoods away from adults. It's well documented that the amount of time available to kids for free play is declining.

Unfortunately, that's not the only thing that has changed since the 80s.

In 1980, less than 10 in 100,000 teen boys committed suicide, and for girls it was only 2 in 100,000.

By 2000, it had increased to 13 in 100,000 for teen boys and 6 in 100,000 for teen girls.

While in 2020, the number of suicides among teen girls remained steady, for our teen boys it jumped again to 17 in every 100, 000.

Behind those stark numbers is the equally alarming doubling in the prevalence of anxiety and affective disorders (such as depression) in our teens and young adults over the last 15 years.

I'm not the only one who believes that the decline in free play is a contributing cause.

Kids Are constantly being pulled away from the opportunity to engage in real play. Screen based activities entice kids away from the outdoors, parental concerns about safety lead to restricted opportunities for independent exploration, and many kids find their afternoons and weekends filled with structured activities such as organised sport and extracurricular activities, leaving little time for unstructured play. Additionally, the focus on academic achievement and structured learning means that most of our kids' time is spent either in school, doing homework, or engaging in other adult-directed activities, dramatically limiting the time available for free play.

The problem with reducing play time is that play is a direct source of happiness for our children. Studies show that kids prefer outdoor play with friends to screen based activities, and outdoor play is consistently ranked by parents as the activity that makes their kids the happiest.

What exactly is it about play that has such a big impact on wellbeing?

Well, you've probably heard me mention before that we all have three basic psychological needs – the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In essence, we need to feel in charge of our lives (autonomy), confident in our own abilities (competence), and have a sense of belonging with those around us (relatedness).

Play satisfies all of these psychological needs. By definition, play is self-directed. Play is the vehicle through which kids build skills. Play is how children make friends.

As parents, how can we give our children the freedom to play?

- 1.** Strengthen autonomy – allow our kids more choice in how they spend their time. Cut back on structured extracurriculars to enable them more time for free play. Give them greater independence, and allow opportunities for them to explore unsupervised.
- 2.** Build competence – support them to pursue things they are interested in. Providing Equipment and exposing them to other people passionate about the same things can be beneficial.
- 3.** Relatedness – build a community of people your kid can play with easily. Things like introducing your family to other families in the neighbourhood is a great start. Additionally, encourage face to face interactions with their friends.

During adolescence, play is moving increasingly online where those three needs are supported in powerful ways. But with the online experience, we see the displacement of nature and outside, the removal of risk (the healthy kind), and a different quality to relationships – perhaps something more shallow.

My encouragement is that we find ways to emphasise the development of self-chosen fresh skills with new or trusted friends. Point your tweens and teens to outside, and pull back (in appropriate ways) on the control. Let them play, explore, discover.

Giving our kids an idyllic childhood with freedom to play and explore isn't just good for them now. It helps them build the resilience they need for healthy adulthood too.



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