We All Need to Play

Playtime: Not Just for Fun and Games!

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ: What is the role of play in social development? Do you think children in this society have equal access to play?

When I think about my youth, what I remember is the fun games I played with my friends. Whether at school recess or on the neighborhood streets, we played everything from “freeze tag” to “wall ball,” from video games to wrestling. While playing these games, I never really thought about what short- or long-term impact they might have. I just knew I was having fun.

Play and Social Development

As I look at society today, I notice that the younger generation is much more technologically advanced than mine but also less advanced socially. I think it’s because my generation spent more time playing with other kids, and less time on devices. Playing with your peers gives you an opportunity to learn how to speak up for yourself and how to listen. You learn how to deal with success and failure. You learn how to develop different parts of your personality that may not come naturally, like being more assertive or considerate, being more patient or humble. You learn what kind of people you do and don’t enjoy being around, and how to communicate with and understand people who are different from you.

Bring Back Recess!

Today, lots of people spend more time staring at their phones than they do at each other. And though I have no problem with gaming, I do think our society could do more to help children develop social skills that support them to transition from childhood to adulthood.

Study the infographic above. Make several true statements about the data you see. Graphic from Educating the Student Body, Chapter 6. <www.nap.edu/read/18314/chapter/8#272>
Unfortunately, children from wealthier families often get access to more of these resources. For example, some public schools have less recess because they need more time for test preparation. Private schools are not required to give students the same standardized tests, so they can be more flexible about giving kids time to play. Furthermore, some school districts do not have the budget to build safe playgrounds with sufficient space for kids to run around. In one neighborhood in Philadelphia where about one third of the people are poor and about half are black, Latino, or Asian, not a single one of the eight elementary schools has a playground.

I hope that in the near future, people will recognize the role “play” has in social development. Parents should encourage their children to put down their phones and tablets and go outside to play. Also, communities and school districts should fight to make sure that all children have equal access to play!

Sterlin Reaves is from Philadelphia. He is incarcerated in Indiana, PA, and he takes correspondence courses.


In 2014, parents and grandparents from the Lake County School District in Florida protested the lack of recess for their school-age children. In 2017, they won a new law requiring children in grades K-5 to get 100 minutes of recess per week. How many minutes is that per school day? Do you think it’s enough?

Yay for Recess: Pediatricians Say It’s as Important as Math or Reading

“Recess is most children’s favorite period, and parents and teachers should encourage that trend, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Recess can be a critical time for development and social interaction, and in a new policy statement published in the journal Pediatrics, pediatricians from the AAP support the importance of having a scheduled break in the school day. ‘Children need to have downtime between complex cognitive challenges,’ says Dr. Robert Murray, a pediatrician and professor of human nutrition at the Ohio State University who is a co-author of the statement. ‘They tend to be less able to process information the longer they are held to a task. It’s not enough to just switch from math to English. You actually have to take a break.’”

Source: <healthland.time.com/2012/12/31/yay-for-recess-pediatricians-say-its-as-important-as-math-or-reading>