

Report: Kids need more time for play

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CHICAGO, Illinois (AP) -- Here's some soothing medicine for stressed-out parents and overscheduled kids: The American Academy of Pediatrics says what children really need for healthy development is more good, old-fashioned playtime.

Many parents load their children's schedules with get-smart videos, enrichment activities and lots of classes in a drive to help them excel. The efforts often begin as early as infancy.

Spontaneous, free play -- whether it's chasing butterflies, playing with "true toys" like blocks and dolls, or just romping on the floor with mom and dad -- often is sacrificed in the shuffle, a new academy report says.

Jennifer Gervasio has a 5-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter involved in preschool three mornings weekly, plus T-ball and ballet for each one day a week. That's a light schedule compared to her kids' friends, and Gervasio said her son in particular has trouble finding buddies who are free to come over and just play.

"There's just such a huge variety of things you can do for your kids if you have the resources, you almost feel why not," said Gervasio, of Wilmette, Ill. "There is a part of me that would worry if I don't sign my son up for some of these things, will he not be on par with the other kids."

For now, she says, she resists the pressure, instead allowing her kids plenty of time for looking for bugs, romping at the beach and other play activities they love to do.

"I truly believe that they're better off when they can just do their own thing," Gervasio said.

Numerous studies have shown that unstructured play has many benefits. It can help children become creative, discover their own passions, develop problem-solving skills, relate to others and adjust to school settings, the academy report says.

"Perhaps above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood," says the report, prepared by two academy committees for release Monday at the group's annual meeting in Atlanta.

A lack of spontaneous playtime can create stress for children and parents alike. If it occurs because young children are plopped in front of get-smart videos or older children lose school recess time, it can increase risks for obesity. It may even contribute to depression for many children, the report says.

Social pressures and marketing pitches about creating "super children" contribute to a lack of playtime for many families. But so does living in low-income, violence-prone neighborhoods where safe places to play are scarce, the report says.

It says enrichment tools and organized activities can be beneficial but should not be viewed as a requirement for creating successful children. Above all, they must be balanced with plenty of free play time, the report says.

"In the current environment where so many parents feel pressure to be super parents, I believe this message is an important one," said Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, the report's lead author and a pediatrician at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Noted pediatrician and author Dr. T. Berry Brazelton praised the academy's report.

"I hope it will have some effect," Brazelton said.

Children overscheduled with structured activities "are missing the chance they have to dream, to fantasize, to make their own world work the way they want it. That to me is a very important part of childhood," Brazelton said.

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