



Despite a trend to structure children's activities, new studies show that free playtime is vital to a child's development.

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The combination of long summer days and tightened budgets could be the best thing that ever happened to our children. The retro idea of "free time" is making a comeback in many households; laid-back pursuits such as finger painting and mud pies are replacing the stream of adult-supervised sporting and educational activities to which kids have become accustomed.

According to a new report, *Kindergartens in Crisis*, published by the Alliance for Childhood, an American organisation that promotes the healthy development of children, the disappearance of unstructured free play can be damaging to a child - far more so than missing out on those Suzuki violin lessons or not mastering basic French by age four. The survey claims that a lack of substantial playtime is responsible for an array of issues including increased bad behaviour, anger and the erosion of social and creative skills. Vivian Gussin Paley, a noted preschool expert, says in the report: "Play contains the only set of circumstances children understand from beginning to end? Within this familiar process of inventing new characters and plots, of pretending to be someone else in another place, the children? develop the intuitive and universal language that binds us all together."

Professor Jay Belsky, the director of the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues at Birbeck University in London, says: "I worry that some of the freedom of childhood is being constrained by an adult need to schedule kids and the belief that everything has to start earlier. But if you push children at ever younger ages, too often it gets in the way of their own capacity to develop."

Belsky believes one of the reasons for this phenomenon is that families in the "educated classes" are now smaller, with one or two children sharing parental attention that a few generations ago would have been divided between four or five infants. "Parents are putting all their eggs in one basket. But does it follow that if a mother bird takes her nestling and drops it out of the nest earlier to teach it to fly, the baby bird will benefit? No. What mother birds do is let the baby stay in the nest until it's time to get out. We have this pernicious belief that getting started on everything earlier is better but, as not

doing enough carries a cost, so does doing too much."

The clinical psychologist Sabine Skaf, a mother of two preschoolers, works with children at the Dubai-based Human Relations Institute. She agrees one of the main reasons parents are foisting extra activities on their offspring is because they are better educated themselves. "We as parents are more anxious because we have access to so much more information than our own parents did. We have the internet of course, and there are so many books on parenting and brain stimulation theories that parents begin to over-analyse. This is the managed child age. We're self-diagnosing our kids."

The Alliance for Childhood report notes that US policy changed in 2007 to include aptitude testing at the kindergarten level, but that this testing was meaningless because children of that age are subject to so much change. A poor reader at three may easily grow to be a gifted writer; a toddler who produces paintings worthy of any clucking parents' fridge door is as likely to become a talented artist as the child sitting next to him playing with bricks. What is most worrying, the report says, is that structured activity is eating away at the one thing that is truly important to a child's future success: play.

