

SCHOOL-AGE DEVELOPMENT: Time Out of School Counts¹

**(Reflections on the Value of Play in the Out-of-School Lives
of School-Age Children and Youth)**

Out-of-school time influences children's present and future lives, and that influence can be positive or negative. Children don't turn off their eyes, ears, and minds when the school bell sends them home. They continue to learn.

School, of course, defines an important part of a child's day. Some people might consider school the central fact of a child's life, and all other time just filler. But school was never intended to "do it all." In fact, children's out-of-school hours may be even more significant than their in-school hours. For example, children's out-of-school lives have a direct bearing on how children perform in school. Moreover, out-of-school time has long-term effects; the ways children spend each day, week, month, and year influences not only their immediate lives, but also their lives as adolescents and adults. A child's time out of school is both the essential fabric of childhood and the underpinning of adult life.

Every child between the ages of six and twelve needs to spend some of that time developing interests, skills, and hobbies. Depending on their ages and abilities, children should spend at least three to six or perhaps seven hours a week in planned activities. These activities must be meaningful to the child; they cannot merely fill time. The activities should be carefully chosen on the basis of the child's own inclinations, and should provide a clear enough structure that they help the child develop a sense of competence, self-esteem, and pride in his or her achievement. Every child needs the chance to become good at something.

Children this age also need to focus on the development of independence, or the *other* 3 Rs: resourcefulness, responsibility, and reliability. These *other* 3 Rs are especially important in out-of-school life. In school, the class schedule, calendar, adults, and academic goals of the school provide a great deal of structure. Out-of-school life is more open-ended, and it is the ideal proving ground for children's mastery of their own interests.....During these years children can gradually assume more and more responsibility for carrying out the activities they choose to do out of school...But children acquire a sense of responsibility in small increments, and premature granting of too much responsibility robs them of their childhood.

Play – A Part of Every Day

All children need...time to play and be.

Children need ample chances for just "going outside to play." Time for daydreaming, dressing up, getting into mischief, talking to one's self, playing in a brook, and time for messing around and doing nothing is at the very heart of childhood. For children six to twelve, play provides opportunities to develop and perfect skills, to rehearse future behaviors, and to solve

¹ Excerpted from Joan M. Bergstrom, Ed.D. *School's Out! Afternoons, Weekends, Vacations*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1990. Pages 2 – 6.

problems. While parents may look on approvingly as their children practice or study or finish an educational project, they may not recognize that play also allows a child to blossom. When children are playing, they are in control. Children constantly learn and test their skills as they roller-skate, play kickball, shoot baskets, and make things out of paper, glue, wood, and fabric. Play and playthings encourage independence, self-confidence, and mastery of skills.

In dramatic play, children this age reconstruct everyday life in their own way. With their friends, they dramatize familiar events using dolls or space creatures and characters. Children also love playing board games like Monopoly with friends. Such games intrigue them because they require understanding and mastering complicated rules. Even when they are telling jokes, playing tricks, filling water balloons, and just acting silly, children are making good use of their time.

A city block swarming with children on a hot summer afternoon overflows with examples of children's ingenuity and creativity. Two children sit on a stoop, playing the card game "Spit." On the sidewalk, four girls are jumping rope and chanting songs, and on the corner others are squirting one another with a hose. All of these children are having pure fun, seizing the moment, learning how to be friends, collaborating, cooperating, exercising, understanding what makes a good sport, and experiencing their neighborhood. Play is a natural and spontaneous activity for children, and learning is the inevitable result.

Children's play with objects and materials teaches them concepts which influence their creativity as adults. Seymour Papert, for example, was a child who was fascinated by cars and mechanical construction materials. Paper, a world-renowned specialist in artificial intelligence and computer science, vividly remembers his childhood play:

Before I was two years old, I had developed an intense involvement with automobiles. The names of car parts made up a substantial part of my vocabulary. I was particularly proud of knowing the parts to the transmission system, the gearbox, and, most especially, the differential. It was, of course, many years later before I understood how gears work; but once I did, playing with gears became a favorite pastime. I loved rotating circular objects against one another in gearlike motions and, naturally, my first 'erector set' project was a crude gear system...I believe that working with differentials did more for my mathematical development than anything I was taught in elementary school. Gears, serving as models, carried many otherwise abstract ideas into my head.²

Every child needs some unstructured time in which to play. Planning out-of-school activities however, does not deprive children of spontaneous play. Planned activities in combination with free play help children develop a sense of responsibility and imagination. There is lots of time in the middle childhood years: time for play, time for planned activities, and time to assume more independence.

² Papert, Seymour. *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1980, p. vi.