



Education Advocate

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Playing can be serious business!

Playing is fun and educational!

Northern Area Alliance Against Highly Addictive Drugs saves teen lives

Will proposed NCLB changes improve education?

Comments on the state graduation proposal are being accepted

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Are building blocks, dollhouses, tag and kickball, marbles, empty refrigerator boxes, and playing pirates and princesses just useless playtime relics from the past? Or is this type of creative, child-driven play an important aspect of healthy growth and development of children?

Researchers who study the value of playing have found that “free and unstructured play is healthy and – in fact – essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, [physical], and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient.”¹

When children are playing creatively, they are actually building real life skills.²

More specifically, researchers have found that child-driven play:

- Develops creativity, imagination, and brain function³
- Enhances language development and expands vocabulary⁴
- Encourages working in groups, sharing, negotiating, and making decisions³
- Develops confidence and resiliency needed to face future challenges³
- Enables healthy physical development and activity that wards off obesity⁵
- Offers parents the opportunity to fully engage with their children³

Psychology professor Dr. Laura Berk identifies one of the most important, long-lasting aspects of play - “Executive Function” – a cognitive skill that allows individuals to self-regulate their emotions, behavior, impulses, and actions. When a self-regulation study done in the late 1940’s was replicated in 2001 with children of the same age, researchers found disturbing results. “Today’s 5-year-olds were acting at the level of 3-year-olds 60 years ago, and today’s 7-year-olds were barely approaching the level of a 5-year-old 60 years ago.”² Dr. Berk asserts

that poor executive function is associated with high dropout rates, drug use, and crime. Furthermore, “good executive function is a better predictor of success in school than a child’s IQ. Children who are able to manage their feelings and pay attention are better able to learn...Self-regulation predicts effective development in virtually every domain.”²

Today, it seems that too many American children never enjoy free playtime since they:

- are hurried to learn more at an earlier age to meet school and parental expectations³
- are overscheduled with adult-led programs, i.e. little league, tutoring, piano lessons³
- devote 40 hours a week to TV, videogames, the Internet and other passive technological activities⁴
- lack access to safe outdoor environments, like parks, woods, fields, vacant lots⁶

enter structured childcare environments at earlier ages and attend after-school programs to accommodate schedules of working parents⁷

- are losing the benefit of recess, physical education, and playtime as schools focus more on academics - In fact, “Reduced time for physical activity may be contributing to the discordant academic abilities between boys and girls, because schools that promote sedentary styles of learning become a more difficult environment for boys to navigate successfully.”³

What are some of the negative effects of this lifestyle? Doctors, teachers, parents and researchers have noted more childhood stress, anxiety, depression, uncontrolled behavior, cheating, and obesity – all of which may be related to diminished, age-appropriate free play.³ Carried to the extreme, Dr. Stuart Brown, retired psychiatrist and founder of the National

“Preschool and kindergarten teachers are reporting that, for the first time, they are witnessing a generation of children, many of whom literally don’t know how to ‘make-believe,’ who have to be taught to play.”⁷

Institute for Play, “recognized the importance of play by discovering its absence in the life stories of murderers and felony drunk drivers.”⁷ His work led to additional research on the causes of violence that pointed to lack of play as a contributing factor. What could be the link between play deprivation and violence? Dr. Brown suggests that playing instills necessary positive human qualities like optimism, trust, compassion, and empathy.

With all this in mind, parents are the key to finding an “appropriate balance between preparing for the future and living fully in the present through play, child-centered organized activities, and rich parent-child interaction.”³ There is no magic formula in childrearing because every child, parent, and family is unique. But the coming summer months offer parents a wonderful opportunity to make carefree play part of their child’s life by visiting a park, daydreaming under a tree, counting the stars, or sailing across the ocean in an imaginary ship as children and parents share the joy of living and learning. ?

- 1 [New AAP Report Stresses Play for Healthy Development](#). American Academy of Pediatrics. www.aap.org/pressroom/play-public.htm.
- 2 Spiegel, Alix. “Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills.” *NPR*. 5 May 2008. www.npr.org.
- 3 Ginsburg, MD, Kenneth R. [The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds](#). American Academy of Pediatrics. *Pediatrics* Vol. 119, No. 1, pp. 182-191. Jan 2007.
- 4 Kalb, Claudia. “Playing Ye Olde Way.” *Newsweek*. 23 Oct 2007. www.newsweek.com.
- 5 Henig, Robin Marantz. “Taking Play Seriously.” [The New York Times](#). 17 Feb 2007. www.nytimes.com.
- 6 “Projects.” Alliance for Childhood. www.allianceforchildhood.org.
- 7 Olfman, Sharna. “What About Play?” [Rethinking Schools Online](#). Spring 2005. Vol. 19, No. 3.
- 8 The National Institute for Play. www.nifplay.org.



Saving Teen Lives, One at a Time

Few things are more tragic than the senseless death of a teenager. When a North Hills teen died of a cocaine overdose in 2002, a friend of the family and former school board member encouraged his superintendent to “do something.” That “something” was the beginning of the **North-ern Area Alliance Against Highly Addictive Drugs**.

This teen’s death served as a wake-up call that drugs were (and still are) a serious threat in our region. Formally introduced on October 17, 2002, the Alliance brought together school and community leaders from twelve south-west Pennsylvania school districts. Administrators who had feared the negative publicity of admitting that their districts might have drug and/or alcohol issues began working together to end this problem, one child at a time. Within two years the Alliance became a 501(c)3 nonprofit and produced the “Listen” video that has made thousands of people in our region aware of this serious threat to our youth. The Alliance has now expanded its membership to public and private schools across Allegheny and Butler Counties.

The primary mission of the Alliance is to be an information network educating the community, raising awareness about youth drug use and offering support to families who suffer due to their child’s drug use and addiction.

The Alliance has three main goals:

1. *Reduce the number of overdose and related deaths of persons under age 25.*
2. *Reduce tobacco, alcohol, and drug related barriers to student achievement.*
3. *Increase community networking.*

To accomplish these goals, school, faith-based, medical, professional, law enforcement, and local government leaders in the region are all actively involved in Alliance

programming. Because funding for treatment continues to decline, the Alliance strongly believes that prevention and early intervention through parent education is imperative. The Alliance tells parents what they need to know long before they need to know it to give them the opportunity to keep their children drug free. Should their children succumb to drug use, parents will have the resources available to get help.

Key Alliance initiatives include:

- Making educational videos for parents and children as young as fifth grade
- Providing parents with tools to assist their children in making healthy decisions
- Teaching leadership skills and community responsibility to young people through the Student Leadership Initiative and 7th grade poster contest
- Identifying community support service resources including where to get help and youth organizations offering healthy activities for kids
- Supporting parents of teen drug users through a program with the Allegheny Probation Department
- Training parents on how to obtain and use drug tests for their children
- Initiating a support group for grieving parents who have lost their children to drug use and addiction

Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers is involved as Honorary Chair of the Alliance. When speaking with middle and high school students, he promotes an anti-drug lifestyle from his example of good work and achievement. ?

For more information, log onto www.drug-alliance.org.

Will NCLB changes improve education?

The reauthorization of the 2001 federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) education law has created a heated battle involving the White House, Department of Education, and Congress. In January, President Bush advised U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to move forward with reforms that can be made administratively, without Congressional action.¹ In April, Secretary Spellings proposed new regulations that will increase federal control of local education while affecting graduation data collection, accountability to parents, reporting test results, and more.

Graduation Rate

Currently, each state selects the statistical method it uses to determine graduation rates. Some states choose a system that overstates the number of graduates, hides the true number of dropouts, and thereby creates a false impression of overall performance. In New Mexico, for example, the dropout rate includes only students who leave school during their senior year, disregarding the number of students who dropped out prior to twelfth grade.²

The proposed regulations would make graduation data from every state uniform and comparable.

- “All states would use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate from high school on time and how many drop out.”³
- For the 2008-2009 school year, all states would have to publish graduation data for every student subgroup, i.e. special education, ESL, and disadvantaged.
- By the 2012-2013 school year, states would have to track various groups of students through high school (grades 9-12) showing actual graduation rates. And school district adequate yearly progress (AYP) would be determined using that data.

Parental Notification

According to NCLB, schools that do not meet AYP over time must offer school choice and/or supplemental services. It has been reported that parents too often do not receive notification of these options in a timely manner.

The proposed changes would require school districts:³

- to notify parents of their options at least two weeks before the beginning of a school year. “Community groups” could assist in this process.
- to develop a plan of action to expand participation in choice and tutoring services before using their Title I money reserved for these services.
- to allow tutoring companies to provide services in the school building.

Test Reporting

NCLB requires students to be assessed for their knowledge of state standards by their own state (the PSSA in Pennsylvania) and by the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card. In many states the NAEP scores are considerably lower than the state assessment scores. The proposal would require states and individual school districts to issue public report

cards with state-level (PSSA) math and reading scores alongside NAEP scores. Note: Not all PA public schools are required to administer the NAEP.

National Technical Advisory Council

Realizing that these proposals will involve the generation and collection of more data, Secretary Spellings has proposed expanding the federal bureaucracy by creating the National Technical Advisory Council. “*The council will be made up of experts in the fields of education standards, accountability systems, statistics and psychometrics and be tasked with advising the Department on highly complex and technical issues and ensuring state standards and assessments are of the highest technical quality.*”³

While the proposed NCLB changes may sound good on paper, will these changes really improve education? Parents must ask:

1. Is school choice a viable option when students must stay within the district? What if problems are district-wide? Or if a district has only one middle school or one high school? Or if other district schools have no room for additional students?
2. Although many PSSA and NAEP score comparisons will show significant differences, which test more accurately measures a student’s mastery of knowledge? Is the comparison really the next step in replacement of state tests with a national exam system based on a national standards and a national curriculum?
3. Would the change in AYP graduation reporting really correct a significant AYP system problem - that below proficiency scores of one subgroup can cause an entire school to be labeled as “failing”?

None of the proposed changes would alter the unrealistic overall goal of NCLB: **All American students will be proficient in math, reading, and science by 2014.** Like many educators and policy makers, economist Richard Rothstein asserts, “*The notion that schools alone can create equal achievement for children of different social backgrounds is not based on research. It is not based on a true understanding of what the many factors that contribute to student achievement are: [It assumes] that health doesn’t matter, housing doesn’t matter, that dysfunctional communities don’t matter.*”⁴

Full details of all proposed changes can be found at www.regulations.gov. Comments may be submitted to the federal government on that site or by mail through June 23. ?

- 1 “U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings Hosts Roundtable, Highlights No Child Left Behind in Topeka Kansas.” U.S. Department of Education Press Release. 20 Feb 2008.
- 2 DuBose, Ben. “Education Secretary Margaret Spellings proposed revisions to No Child Left Behind.” [Los Angeles Times](http://www.losangeles.com). 23 April 2008.
- 3 “U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings Announces Proposed Regulations to Strengthen No Child Left Behind.” U.S. Department of Education Press Release. 22 April 2008
- 4 Sanchez, Claudio. “‘No Child’ Law Picked Apart as Renewal Fight Looms.” [NPR](http://www.npr.org). 7 May 2008.

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The Graduation Debate Continues

On April 24th, CEO hosted a panel discussion on the PA Board of Education's proposed graduation regulations. Although no representative from the PA state Board or the Department of Education accepted the invitation to participate, ten education authorities from groups across the state provided facts, information, and opinions on this groundbreaking graduation plan. (For more information on the proposal, go to www.ceopa.org and download the March/April 2008 newsletter.)

Both the Pennsylvania **House** and **Senate Education Committees** are currently considering the proposal. The **Independent Regulatory Review Committee (IRRC)** is also taking written comments. Contact information is provided so you can voice your opinion.

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