

Old-Fashioned Play

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The trouble with using experience as a guide is that the final exam often comes first and then the lesson. -Unknown

In a recent story on NPR, "[Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills](#)", Alix Spiegel talked about the adverse effects of changes in children's play...

"...For most of human history what children did when they played was roam in packs, large or small, more or less unsupervised, and engage in freewheeling imaginative play. They were pirates and princesses, aristocrats and action heroes.... They improvised their own play; they regulated their play; they made up their own rules....

"But during the second half of the 20th century... play changed radically.... Children were supplied with ever more specific toys for play and predetermined scripts. Essentially, instead of playing pirate with a tree branch, they played Star Wars with a toy light saber....

"A growing number of psychologists believe that these changes in what children do has also changed kids' cognitive and emotional development. It turns out that all that time spent playing make-believe actually helped children develop a critical cognitive skill called executive function. Executive function has a number of different elements, but a central one is the ability to self-regulate. Kids with good self-regulation are able to control their emotions and behavior, resist impulses, and exert self-control and discipline.

"We know that children's capacity for self-regulation has diminished. A recent study replicated a study of self-regulation first done in the late 1940s, in which psychological researchers asked kids ages 3, 5, and 7 to do a number of exercises. One of those exercises included standing perfectly still without moving. The 3-year-olds couldn't stand still at all, the 5-year-olds could do it for about three minutes, and the 7-year-olds could stand pretty much as long as the researchers asked. In 2001, researchers repeated this experiment... but the results were very different. 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...

"...Self-regulation is incredibly important. Poor executive function is associated with high dropout rates, drug use, and crime. In fact, 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.

"...Essentially, because children's play is so focused on lessons and leagues, and because kids' toys increasingly inhibit imaginative play, kids aren't getting a chance to practice policing themselves."
