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Not so "free": Increasing elementary children's free time

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Abstract

Free play has been drastically decreasing recently and this is an issue for young children. Factors contributing to this decline include external influences, such as school, parents, and activities.

This issue is important for children’s lives, impacting their health and developmental skills. This project works toward providing more opportunities for children to experience free play throughout their everyday lives. The primary stakeholder perspectives obtained were the parents of children who are directly affected by this issue. Based on an analysis of the data and relevant research literature, an action was taken to respond to the lack of free play in a way that informs the individuals impacted by this issue.

Not so “free”: Increasing elementary children’s free time

One day while I was observing and volunteering in a new classroom, I met a young boy named Johnny¹ who had been labeled as a “troublesome” or “bad” child by the teachers. I came to find out from the teachers that this particular child was constantly ignoring directions given by the teachers, not sitting in his seat, and distracting his peers from completing their work. It would have been really easy for me to have placed that same label on Johnny as those teachers did, without any experience with this child. I decided that I was not going to let these stories bias my interactions with him. After no time at all, it became very clear that Johnny was indeed doing the exact things that the teachers had informed me of. What the teachers had not told me was that his punishment often included him not being able to go out to recess with his peers. It became very clear to me in that moment that this child’s behavior may have an alternative cause than the teachers had originally expected.

I was fortunate enough to get to teach in this classroom for a day while those same teachers evaluated me and my interactions with the students. I was determined to make sure that all of the students, including Johnny, had a “good” day while I was in charge of teaching the class. I organized my curriculum in a way that allowed for the students to have ample opportunities for free play throughout the day so that they could give their minds a break from all the academic material that they were learning, to let their bodies move, and to give them freedom over themselves for a short while. The results were so outstanding that the teachers appeared dumbfounded. Little did those teachers know, I had intentionally to make sure that free-play was a priority in my curricula; so when they saw all of the students “good” behavior they could not

¹ Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations

figure out the source. That day there were very few behavioral issues and all of the students appeared to have enjoyed themselves at school. I explained to those teachers at the end of the day what I had done, and they were amazed to see that a change that small made such a drastic improvement in the student’s ability to appropriately participate in classroom activities. At the end of the day, Johnny was not a “bad” child. He just needed an appropriate outlet to express all of the creative and expressive energy that he had. Free-play gave him, and many of the other students, the opportunity to let out that pent-up energy.

Many of those who are no longer students forget the limitations that are forced upon students by adults, teachers, and the school itself. There is very little time for students to make decisions about themselves, for yourself in a school day. Free-play gives children that control and that time to do whatever interests them. Unfortunately, not all schools have the resources or possibility to allot a significant amount of free-play time that children need to develop. That is why having free-play time after school is so important, it helps children detox from all of the work that they did throughout their school day and focus on things that make them happy. I hope that we can create an opportunity for all children to have free-play time as a part of their everyday experience.

Literature Synthesis and Integration

Free play is commonly used as a term that can vary in its interpretation. For the purposes of this paper free play will be defined as play that is free from instruction, direction, or requirements; it is an “unrestricted movement, activity, or interplay” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Wenner (2009) attempts to further clarify this idea by separating a common interpretation of play (games) from the idea of free play by stating that, “...games have a priori rules—set up in

advance and followed. Play, on the other hand, does not have a [sic] priori rules, so it affords more creative responses" (p. 24). In his novel, Freud discusses his Psychoanalytic Theory of Play which emphasizes his belief on the importance and the substantial impact of play in young children's lives (Freud & Hubback, 1922). This theory is further explained by Bettelheim when he discusses that Freud believed play was an important time in a child's life, it is when they learn to express themselves (1987, p. 41). Although free play drastically impacts our lives as children, its execution has proven to be much more difficult than it may seem.

What is the issue?

Free-play is often seen, in our modern-day society, as a non-necessity, as something that comes only after everyday tasks are completed. What if, it was actually far more important than it may seem? Wenner emphasizes the importance of play when she states that "children's free-play time dropped by a quarter between 1981 and 1997" (2009, p. 24). The amount of free time children are getting exposed to now, is even less than they were getting back then. Stuart L. Brown further reinforces this idea by stating that free play has decreased "...71% in one generation..."(2014). This is an extremely drastic transformation of the presence of free-play in our society, in such a short period of time. Free play time has dwindled away by a society that: "teaches to the test" and increases homework demands to meet the ever rising education standards, focuses more on building a resume through advanced courses and extracurricular activities. All while poverty, crime, hunger, and economic/academic stress, have all become extremely prominent front runners in the decrease in free play time for children (Brown, 2014). All of these societal influences have serious implications in regard to the amount of free play that children have access to.

Why is it an issue?

The prevalence of free play has drastically diminished over the more recent years. Children are less likely to have free play as a part of their lives as they once were. In a cross-sectional study done by Veitch, Salmon, and Ball they stated that, “compared with previous generations, children today spend less time playing outdoors within the neighbourhood [sic]” (2010, p.1). Wenner strengthens this idea by stating that, “a lack of opportunities for unstructured, imaginative play can keep children from growing into happy, well-adjusted adults (2009, p. 23). Children are paying the price of the steady decline: their health and development of skills are largely impacted by this.

Health. While children are developing health is an extremely important factor that can have a drastic impact on their lives. The topic of health is often heavily associated with children in areas such as: physical health, nutrition, sleep, and mental health. This emphasis on children’s health can be seen in the National Prevention Strategy of 2011, a government funded strategy run through the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. The goal of this strategy is to “increase the number of Americans who are healthy at every stage of life”(National Prevention Council, 2011). The idea of play is rarely talked about in conjunction with children’s health, as displayed by the National Prevention Strategy and many other policies around children’s health. Lester and Russell claim that, “play is fundamental to survival, health, well-being and development, rather than being an optional luxury” (2010, p. 4). Wenner furthers this claim by stating that play, “...is critical for becoming socially adept, coping with stress and building cognitive skills such as problem solving” (2009, p. 23). With the idea that free play has a drastic

impact on children’s health, there needs to be a more considerable emphasis put on increasing the amount of free play that children have access to.

Skills. Free play, or the lack of it, plays an important role in the developmental process that children go through. The skills that children acquire as they develop can have a huge effect on the rest of their lives. According to Wenner play can, “...help us develop strong social skills” and “... fosters creative thinking” (2009, p. 28). She furthers this claim by saying that play is “...a way in which children learn...” (Wenner, 2009). There is a wide range of skills that can be developed through play, shown in *Figure 1*. The notion of play providing support towards the development of key skills is extremely important and, based off of the previous information, should be highly regarded when considering how much access to free time a child should have.

Figure 1

Skills Developed Through Play



(Cor, 2013)

What is/should be done?

When thinking about the lack of free play that children are currently having access to, it is not only important to think about the root of the problem, but also to find a solution. There are

thousands of solutions that could potentially help individuals with this problem, but may not change the underlying cause. Finding commonalities in research, studies, and literature may help to provide solutions that not only help alleviate the problem but also are relevant to the source of the problem. There were many ideas addressed by individuals relevant to this particular field of study but some common themes emerged including the need for: less structure for children, more help with homework, and more parent availability.

Less Structure. The argument for less structure in children’s lives stems from the idea that if children had less assigned engagements then they would in turn have more available time for free play. Lester and Russell support this idea by saying, “adults generally define the purpose and use of space and time; children usually find ways to play that appear within the cracks of this adult order” (2010, p. ix). In an essence, if there was less order created by adults, children would not have to work so hard to find moments of unstructured play, it would essentially become a part of their lives. This idea is taken one step further with the idea that, “if play is understood as not controlled by adults, as interwoven into the fabric of daily life, then there is a need to think beyond providing adult-sanctioned, dedicated places and programmes for play” (Lester & Russell, 2010, p. 2). A significant impact on the amount of free play children have can be positively strengthened with the decrease in structure in the child's daily schedule.

Homework Help. When parents simplify and provide resources for children while they do homework, children will spend less time doing homework and more time playing. Children will still partake in all their academic requirements, but with tools they can complete it with as little frustration as possible. Lester and Russell support this idea by referencing a quote by Jane Nyambura stating, “children are not supposed to be overworked with homework or work at

home. Children should be left to play” (2010, p. 3). With the decrease in time spent doing academic work, children will be given a wider range of possibilities around free play.

Parent Availability. A common struggle amongst parents is trying to find balance between being a parent and having to work. This a tough feat for anyone to find this balance that works for both the children and the employer. Lester and Russell emphasize the importance of parents being available when they express that, “adults need to pay attention to creating the conditions in which play can take place, to address a child’s right to provision for play” (2010, p. x). Lester and Russell are advocating in their work that parents take their available time to create an environment that is suitable for free and unstructured play (2010).

In conclusion, the lack of free play is dramatically influenced by factors far outside children’s control. The literature suggested that there is a strong need for less structure, help with homework, and more parental availability. These solutions could bring about change towards an increase in the amount of free play children have access to in their everyday lives. In order to establish the best way to create change around children’s access to free play, I reached out to individuals who experience this issue first-hand.

Method

For this Capstone Project, an investigation was conducted to analyze how parents of elementary school children view the amount of free time that their children are getting on a daily basis and what they think could be done to improve it. Based on an analysis of the data and relevant research literature, the researcher used what she has learned to formulate an action that responds to the focus issue in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

Research conducted for the purpose of this project took place in Mountain and Stream County, California. Mountain County is located in central California on the Pacific Coast. It is lined with beaches and surrounded by beautiful state parks. It is demographically diverse, having roughly 26% of its occupants being under the age of 18 and has roughly 3.3 persons per household. The median household income for this county is \$63,876 and about 12% of its population is below the poverty line (Census profile: “Mountain” County, 2017). It is the third largest agricultural county in all of California and attracts more than 3 million tourists every year to its beautiful coastal locations (AT A GLANCE: “Mountain” County, 2017).

Stream County, similar to Mountain County, has 23% of its population under the age of 18 and roughly 3 persons per household. The median household income for this county is \$111,069 and about 9% of its population is below the poverty line (Census profile: “Stream” County, 2017). The most common profession of this area is manufacturing, employing roughly 18% of its residences (“Stream” County, 2017).

Participants and Participant Selection

I invited five parents to participate in this study. This group of participants has been invited to participate because they have children that are not getting enough free time after school.

Researcher

This concern is personally meaningful to me because, as the push for meeting state standards has become at the forefront of education, I have noticed a shift in the amount of time

that children are able to do things just for themselves. I have seen this causing extreme stress and frustration among many students. I believe free time is extremely important to children's overall well-being and I want to find a way to incorporate more of it into their lives. As a previous elementary school student, I have experienced this struggle first hand. I have also learned about the consequences of the lack of free play throughout my educational experience. I have received two Associate Degrees in Liberal Studies and one Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education and working towards completion of my Bachelors Degree in Liberal Studies. Lastly, I have seen the effects of lack of free play on the teachers first-hand, having been a teacher (both employed and as a student) within multiple different classrooms for over 5 years now. My biggest bias in regard to this study is that I will have to continuously be aware of throughout this project is the fact that I have never been a parent of a child. I will have to be very open when listening to parents and set aside what I have learned throughout my education so it does not bias the real-life experiences these children and parents are going through.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

1. Describe what your child does after school?

What is the average amount of free time is your child is getting after school?

Do you think the amount of free time your child is getting after school is meeting your child's needs? Why or Why not?

2. What is currently being done (if anything) to improve the amount of free time that your child gets after school - by whom - and what do you think about these efforts? Why?
3. What do you think should be done about the amount of free time that your child gets after school?

4. What do you think are the obstacles/drawbacks/disadvantages to changing the amount of free time that your child gets after school?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the amount of free time that your child gets after school and/or the improvement of this issue?

Procedure

I received permission from one of the directors at a school in “Stream” Country that worked with me, to create a plan that would allow for me to meet up with as many parents as possible without encroaching on the school setting and imposing on the parents lives. I would like to note that I have met a majority, if not all, of the parents before working on this project because of my volunteer work with this school. We decided to create a handout for all of the parents to take home with them and fill out in the comfort of their own homes and take as much or as little time with the survey as they would like. The purpose of this was to make sure that they were not pressured by the school, myself, or any other external factors that could have influenced their answers if it was conducted at the school setting. Before the filling out the handout, parents were provided a consent form with an attached will be a letter describing the project. The handout that I provided for the parents included information about: myself, the purpose and use of the action project, the survey, and my contact information. The handout is included as follows in its entirety:

Dear Parents,

My name is Annie Santos and I am a Liberal Studies student at CSUMB working on my graduation project. I will be doing research about what parents of elementary school students have to say about the amount of free time that their children are getting after school and how to improve it. This research is important because children need sufficient free time in their days to allow their brain to relax and recharge, while also allowing for creative expression and overall growth/development. I need your permission

to carry out my project.

Completing this survey means that you have read and understand the purpose and use for this survey and agree to this information being used for my action project in order to complete graduation requirements at CSUMB. Everything about this survey will remain anonymous and I will be using pseudonyms for all people and places involved in this survey. For more information about myself, the study, and details about my graduation project, please feel free to contact me using the email listed below. The survey should take about 10 minutes and can be completed during times most convenient for you.

Thank you for your support of my research and graduation project.

Sincerely,

Annie Santos
Email²

Survey

1. Describe what your child does after school?
What is the average amount of free time is your child is getting after school?
Do you think the amount of free time your child is getting after school is meeting your child’s needs? Why or Why not?
2. What is currently being done (if anything) to improve the amount of free time that your child gets after school - by whom - and what do you think about these efforts? Why?
3. What do you think should be done about the amount of free time that your child gets after school?
4. What do you think are the obstacles/drawbacks/disadvantages to changing the amount of free time that your child gets after school?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the amount of free time that your child gets after school and/or the improvement of this issue?

The parents were able to deposit the completed handout in a designated deposit spot located in the director's office. I was ensured that all of these documents will not be read by anyone other than the individual who completed it and myself in order to maintain complete confidentiality.

For members of “Mountain” county, any and all surveys completed will be conducted

² personal email removed for confidentiality purposes

face-to-face using the same questions and structural format as listed in the handout. I will then analyze all of the surveys turned in for commonalities in responses in order to create appropriate solutions based off of the stakeholders suggestions.

Data Analysis

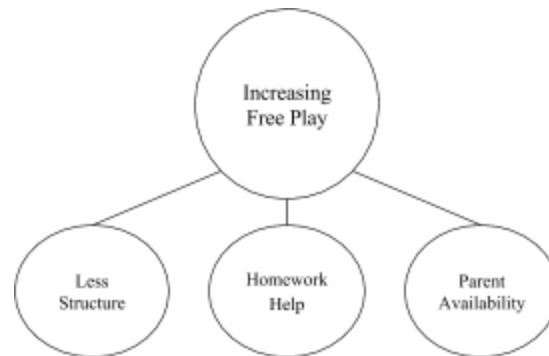
Transcribed interviews are coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, parents were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve the amount of free play time that their children had everyday. This is important because free play can dramatically impact children's health and cognitive, physical, social, and language skills. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time; cost; and feasibility. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

After interviewing multiple parents about the effects of the lack of free play time on their children, there was an abundance of concerns around the issue, what caused this issue, and what the individuals interviewed thought would be viable solutions. It was not surprising to see that there were several themes that emerged across all of the interviews conducted. As displayed in Figure 2, the three most prominent solutions that emerged in the interviews were: less structure in the children's day, decrease in homework or more help with homework so that the children didn't have to spend more time doing it, and parents wishing they had more time available for their children.

Figure 2

Increasing Free Play**Less Structure**

The most prominent solution that came to the forefront in the interviews was about the amount of structure that was in the children’s lives. Parents addressed many concerns about the amount of structure that had been woven into their child’s lives from things like school, sports, activities, along with any and all other endeavors. In an interviewed one parent stated, in response to the amount of free time their child has, “I wish it could increase [child] has too much structure” (Miller, personal communication, October 27, 2017). Another parent reinforced this idea by saying, “not as many structured activities” (Peters, personal communication, October 29, 2017). Structure in children’s lives is inevitable and often necessary, but when it begins to run their lives and impedes on their ability to have exposure to free play, it becomes a problem. Wenner (2009) and Brown (2014) support the idea that a drastic decline in children's free play in recent years is often tied to the hold that activities and obligations have on children. With this in mind, it is clear that work needs to be done in order to improve the amount of time that children have available to them. In order to decrease the structure in children’s day, informing parents about ways to manage the structure that their children have could be a viable action. This could

in turn create a greater opportunity for free play in the children’s everyday lives.

Homework Help

Along with the need for less structure in children’s lives, a common comment that arose in the interviews was about the amount of homework the children had and how long it took them. With the current structure within the public education system, it is nearly impossible to completely avoid homework at all but, ideally there will be a healthy balance between homework and free play. One parent commented in an interview saying that their child needed, “homework support” (Silverstein, personal communication, October 26, 2017). Another parent mentioned that the main reason that their child was not able to have free time because, “[child] has to do homework” (Miller, personal communication, October 27, 2017). The effects of homework on children can even be seen in Brown’s (2014) work when he discusses how free time has become consequence of our society teaching to the test and increasing homework demands to meet the rising education standards. What the interviews and the literature are telling us is that this way of life is not sustainable for children. They are missing out on the wonderful benefits that free play can give them. The solution to this problem is not as easy as it may seem, because creating change within the education system is a long and trying process. But, there are things that we can do to make the process of completing homework much easier for the students. One of the more feasible ways that we can help minimize the effects of this problem is by providing support and guidance for children so they are spending as little time on homework as possible. By doing this, the children will still be able to get all of the benefits of doing the homework without spending time struggling or confused trying to complete it on their own. In order to provide more opportunities for students to get help with their homework, informing parents about ways to

support and assist their children have could be a viable action. This could in turn create a greater opportunity for children to spend less time doing homework, allowing for more free time in their schedule.

Parent Availability

Last, but certainly not least, was the issue of parents available time for their children. Most parents work or have prior engagements that take up a large majority of their time, so they put their children in various activities so that the children are safe and doing something while the parent is at work. Though this solution does attempt to keep children safe and occupied it nearly mimics the same sort of structure that the children are already experiencing at school, namely an environment with little freedom and an adult constantly dictating what the children do with their time. One parent stated, that “the time I get off work” was a heavy influence on the amount of free play their child got in a day (Martin, personal communication, October 26, 2017). Another parent stated that, “2 [sic] parents working” was the reason that their child was not getting as much free play as they needed (Peters, personal communication, October 29, 2017). An educator weighed in on this issue by saying that, “parents need to be more involved in their childs [sic] day. Kids spend too much time at activities which parents use as babysitters” (Roth, personal communication, October 26, 2017). This issue is the hardest to find a solution for because the cost of a parent not working or working less can be absolutely detrimental to a family. It would be extremely hard to make this change possible in a large majority of families and working free play into the time that the children are away from their parents can be equally as difficult. This solution is not impossible but, it would take a lot of work to make it happen.

Conclusion

After considering all of the options, I would recommend creating an informational pamphlet that would help educate all individuals affected by this issue. With this option I am able to provide information for parents about manage the structure that their children have and ways to support and assist their children with their homework, encompassing two of the action options that I discussed above. This solution was the quickest, cheapest, and most feasible solution; while also providing the most information possible for parents. The pamphlet would be provided to the schools and individual families that participated in the interviews since they displayed the need for free time. The target audience for this pamphlet would be parents of children who are affected by a lack of free time. I recognize that the other option has significant benefits, especially if the change was able to be made, but in order for this solution to be implemented there would need to be a lot a time and money available in order for this to occur.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Time	Cost	Feasibility
Less Structure	Low	Low	High
Homework Help	Low	Low	High
Parent Availability	High	High	Low

Limitations

There are several different limitations that could present themselves when trying to implement this solution. Firstly, there may be parents that do not want to take the time to read the

information that I present in my pamphlet. Secondly, it may not reach all of the parents that are affected by this issue since I am not individually distributing the pamphlet to each parent.

Additionally, although I have done all that I can to create a pamphlet as beneficial as possible, the information provided in my pamphlet may not be applicable for every family. Lastly, there is always the potential that someone just throws my pamphlet away making its informational merits completely ineffective to all the parents that could have been impacted.

Concession

The action option that I chose not to implement, working toward increasing parents availability, has some amazing strengths if implemented. I was not able to implement it because of the time constraints of this course and the financial obligations it would take to make this happen for both myself and the families. The strengths of this option largely encompass the idea that parents would have more time for their children. As I stated above, many times parents use structured activities as a way to keep their children occupied while they try to complete their everyday duties. If parents had more availability in their everyday schedule, there may be more opportunities for their children to experience free play.

Potential Negative Outcomes

With the selection and implementation of this solution, the biggest negative outcome that could occur would be parents not actually reading the information. If the pamphlet is actually read, there is very little risk for negative outcomes since this solution just aims to educate the audience effected. Even if there is minimal risk, individuals could still feel uncomfortable or disagree with the information but, since there is no requirements tied to this information there

should be no strain from those who are presented it.

Action Documentation and Reflection

The focus of my project was to increase the amount of free time that children had and work with the parents and children affected in order to find ways to effectively do so. I interviewed five parents about their child’s free time and what the major influencing factors were in regard to how much time their child had. The interviews showed that the amount of structure, the time spent on homework, and parents availability were the three most prevalent issues facing free play. I wanted to do as much as I could in order to help children get as much free play opportunities as possible so I decided to combine the action options around decreasing structure and helping children complete their homework into one great informational piece. By informing people about the importance of this solution and then providing them methods in which to enact this into their personal lives.

In order to inform as many individuals as possible, I chose to create a poster for the parents about this particular topic, provided in Appendix A. I have included a complete reference list on all sources used to make this poster and my personal information on the back of the poster, provided in Appendix B. This poster gave me the opportunity to reach a large audience while keeping a low cost. Once I created the poster, I have posted it so that all the parents that participated in the interviews and many others could see it. It was posted in the main office and in the after school program at school located in “Stream County”. Since I have put it up in the school there seems to be a positive response from the parents and staff that have encountered it. The only thing I wish I could change about this action option is that I wish I could collect

feedback from all of those who come in contact with the poster I created. I think that feedback is a very helpful tool in assessing the effectiveness of a particular thing.

Critical Reflection

This project has brought forth a lot of emotions and experiences that I had never expected to manifest. I assumed that it would be like any other major project that I had completed in my education thus far. I was completely wrong. I had envisioned that, as part of this class, we would just write a paper about a topic that we are passionate about and then try to create change. Sounds easy enough on paper, but that is the furthest from the truth. Not only did we have to go through enormous amounts of literature to back up our ideas but, we had to work with individuals dealing with our issue as well. This is not a project that you can depend solely on yourself, you have to rely on the people in your life in order to complete this project effectively. This is a really hard concept for me. I am very self-reliant and really struggle to ask others for help. This was an issue that I struggled with not only for myself but when working towards creating change. I had to go far outside of my comfort zone to collect the data. Once the data was collected and analyzed, I found it really easy to find some emergent themes and solution options. I am happy to have completed this action project and to have worked towards creating change in regard to the amount of free time that elementary school children have access to in their everyday lives.

One of the most prevalent themes that I feel impacted my professional development was MLO 1: Developing Educator. With this course and all of the other courses I have completed at California State Monterey Bay (CSUMB) I feel that I have developed my pedagogical skills in a way that will help me understand and exhibit information regarding the field of education.

Another theme that impacted my professional development was MLO 2: Diversity and Multicultural Scholar, it helped me see how much things like our identity, practices, and institutions impact not only our own lives but the lives of those around us. Additionally, it showed me how to take that information and apply it to my own educational practices. The last theme that I feel drastically impacted my professional development was MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator. This theme helped me understand how to be an effective advocate for the students that I encounter in my future classrooms. In order to continue growing in my professional development I feel like the next step will be gain more experience working in a diverse classroom and learning to implement the techniques that I learned in all my coursework.

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Appendix A

A SERIOUS NEED FOR PLAY



Play is learning!
 Play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development.

Free play has decreased 71% in one generation
 Stuart L. Brown

"A lack of opportunities for unstructured, imaginative play can keep children from growing into happy, well-adjusted adults"
 Melinda Wenner

"Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity."
 Kay Redfield Jamison



Increasing Play

Less Structure

- Allow time for free, unstructured, play
- Don't overcrowd your child's schedule
- Limit extracurricular activities
- Encourage play
- Provide opportunities for choice
- Allow for a little chaos
- Limit screen time
- Be flexible



Simplifying Homework Time

- Provide a quiet place for homework without distractions
- Provide help and support
- Be available
- Encourage your child and their abilities
- Set a good example
- Get help if your child is struggling

Appendix B

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