

# Children benefit from unstructured play

Sharon Roulier/CNS

Creativity does not take batteries. It doesn't come in a box, or off a computer screen.

It comes, according to those working in the field of child development, from within children during free, unstructured playtime.

The delights of playtime are among the greatest joys of childhood, but a growing number of young children today have less time for unstructured play or are spending too much time in front of a computer or television, said Jeff Schrenzel, associate professor of social work at Western New England College in Springfield, Mass.

Children, he added, can and should learn more about life from playtime with peers than from the latest computer or video games.

"Kids' lives are also getting more and more complicated," said Schrenzel, with many having structured after-school activities. "So many activities end up putting stress on kids."

"There's something to be said with kids creating their own play," he said. "We, as adults, don't allow it as much because with technology being what it is today, it is so easy to just buy it

## Health

for the child. But what a child is not having the opportunity to do is to be creative with playtime."

"Parents want to have as many options for their kids as they can, and unstructured time becomes harder and harder to find," he added.

During playtime, children learn much from their peers and siblings, said Schrenzel. "They learn what's allowed, what's not allowed and when it's allowed."

Children permitted to play freely with peers learn to see things through another person's point of view and develop skills associated with cooperating, helping, sharing and solving problems.

"You have to get along with someone else, which you don't have to do with video games," he said.

Research has shown that unstructured physical play helps reduce stress in children's lives and that physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, based in Washington, notes some examples



Martin Lueders/CNS

**Turn off the TV, put away the computer games, videos and battery-powered toys and allow children to develop their own style of play.**

of the value of unstructured playtime:

- Play is an active form of learning that unites the mind, body and spirit. Until at least the age of 9, a child's learning occurs best when the whole self is involved.

- Play reduces the tension that often comes with having to achieve or needing to learn.

- Children express and work out emotional aspects of everyday ex-

periences through unstructured play.

- The development of a child's perceptual abilities may suffer when so much of their experience is through television, computers, books, worksheets and media that require only two senses.

- Children who are less restricted in their access to the outdoors gain competence in moving through the larger world. Developmentally they should gain the ability to navigate their immediate environs (in safety) and lay the foundation for the courage that will enable them eventually to lead their own lives.

Schrenzel urges parents to keep the following ideas about school-age play in mind:

- "No goal is sometimes OK." A child does not always have to be doing something for a reason or an educational purpose.

- Unstructured play with peers fosters socialization skills.

- Play teaches children how to get along with others.

- School-aged kids can be stressed from having too many structured activities.

- Remember how play was fun for you as a child.

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