

CONNECTIONS

Volume X, Issue II A Publication of the Hull Public Schools October 2009

Play is Priceless

Childhood is an enchanting and wondrous time that should be respected and cherished. Yet, during the past several decades, free-play has drastically been reduced. Creative, open-ended, free-play is rapidly disappearing from our homes, our schools, and our communities. The cause is complex but many factors include: pop culture, changes in family structure, hurried lifestyles, unsafe neighborhoods, technology, and an increased focus on student achievement.



Several studies have reported this decline: over the past 20 years children have lost 8 hours of unstructured, spontaneous free-play a week; more than 30,000 schools have eliminated recess to make more time for academics and passive screen time has increased from 30 minutes to 3 hours per day in homes. In a mere six years, from 1997 to 2003, the time children spent outdoors fell 50 percent and time spent in organized sports doubled as well as age levels for participation have decreased to preschool age and younger.

Today, children are playing with more specific, close-ended toys that have pre-planned purposes. Essentially,

instead of playing with cardboard boxes, creating make-believe cars, children are riding in miniature electric vehicles that resemble mom's SUV. Experts believe that it is this decrease in playing with open-ended self-created play that is reducing children's creative aptitude.

Psychologists believe that changes in children's play have negatively impacted cognitive and emotional development. Because children's activities are now more regulated by adults, children are not able to practice regulating their play and themselves. Self-regulation is a crucial developmental task. Developmental neuroscience research provides evidence that free-play actually helps children develop a critical cognitive skill called executive function. The brain's executive function has many features, the central one being the ability to self-regulate. Children who have good self-regulation are able to control their emotions and behavior, resist impulses and exert self-control and self-discipline.

One reason make-believe play is such a powerful tool for building self-discipline is because during make-believe, children engage in what is called private speech. Children talk to themselves about make-believe, children engage in what is called

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Happy Halloween
Be sure to check inside for our fun October Events

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Published by Maggie Ollerhead & Joan F. MacDonald

Hull Early Childhood Advisory Council

Community Partnerships for Children

Play is Priceless

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private speech. Children talk to themselves about what they are going to do and how they are going to do it. If we compare preschoolers' activities and the amount of private speech that occurs across them, we find that this self-regulating language is highest during make-believe play. This type of self-regulating language has been shown in many studies to be predictive of executive functions. Private speech is used to overcome obstacles, to master cognitive and social skills, and to manage emotions. Unfortunately, the more structured the play, the less private speech children exhibit.

Parents and educators who favor traditional classroom-style learning over free, unstructured playtime in preschool and kindergarten may actually be stunting a child's development instead of enhancing it. Studies that compared the performance of children attending academic preschools with those attending play-based preschools showed no advantage in reading and math achievement for children attending academic preschools by the age of 4th grade. However, evidence did suggest that children attending academic preschools had higher levels of test anxiety, were less creative, and had more negative attitudes toward school than did the children attending play-based preschool.

Families should be sure to include time daily and appreciate the values of free exploration both outdoors and during their child's indoor play.

Adapted from an article by Susan Shepardson for Community Playthings

From the CPC Coordinator's Desk.....

By Maggie Ollerhead - mollerhead@town.hull.ma.us

In this current fiscal economy it is nice to know that there is help out there for Mom's and their children. WIC is a Nutrition Program that provides nutrition and health education, healthy food and other services for pregnant women and families with infants and children under 5 years old. They provide checks to allow families to get food. WIC now offers a greater variety of foods. A family of 2 (parent & child) can make up to \$26,955 and be eligible; for each additional person in the family add \$6,919. **For more information or to enroll, please call the main office at 617-376-4190.**



What Scares Children: Preschoolers



All parents have had the experience of their children suddenly being afraid of something; whether it's the vacuum cleaner, strangers, bugs or any other seen or unknown thing that they can imagine. While it can be hard to reassure children, know that it is a common problem in all children's development.

Fears are a normal part of every child's experience and often reflect an increased awareness of the world around them. Fears don't necessarily end with childhood. Most of us know at least one perfectly rational adult who has some unexplained fear.

3-5 years: Starting around the age of three, children's fears reflect their developing imaginations. Preschoolers have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from reality, the witches in fairy tales and the monsters in movies can appear menacingly real. Reading a book that covers this topic or allowing the child to act out their fears such as playing with a doctor kit can help relieve them of their fears. For children who are more sensitive, you may need to prescreen a movie even if it is a known children's company.

Halloween Fears: Since the dark is a common fear, head out early and carry a flashlight. This also helps you to avoid the scary costumes of the older children.

Both sections of this articles are from Parents Magazine 1996

Hull Family Network

Note from the HFN Coordinator:

Joan F. MacDonald, jmacdonald@town.hull.ma.us

Childhood should be a journey not a race. When I visit toy stores, hear commercials for reading programs geared towards young preschool aged children and hear families talk about the many activities for very young children now, I frequently cringe at the emphasis on formal teaching of concepts and skills that children aren't ready for, by people who should know child development. This summer when I read the article that I shortened for this month's newsletter, I instantly thought that I needed to save it to share with families.

Child development is based on a series of progression of skills that continue throughout life. Time spent crawling as an infant builds a child's hand muscles that allow him to write neatly as an elementary student and is the start of upper body strength that allows him to use the monkey bars and to shoot a 3 pointer in high school on the basketball team. When parents push their children to do more sooner it is not always for the best, both skill wise and social emotionally.

Enjoy this time with your child when you don't need to run from place to place by taking time to just enjoy the look of discovery on your child's face as he watches ants crawl or the delight when she stacks the tower even higher still.

What Scares Children: Infants and Toddlers



Birth to 12 months: Children's earliest fears are based on sensitivity to their environment. Children who are afraid of loud noises or vacuums need soft voices, soothing touches and gradual introductions to new experiences. Separation anxiety arises during times that infants realize that their parents are distinct from themselves and can leave.

1-3 years: As babies grow into toddlers, they still fear being separated from you as they become more independent and are able to move away from you. Support your child's level of sensitivity with strangers and new situations by not pushing him to join immediately and asking people to respect his wishes around touch. Children often become afraid of the water, taking baths, the dark and other events in their daily life. Explaining activities in advance, listening to your child's fears and allowing gradual exposure all help to ease a child's fear. Giving him the words to describe what he is feeling can also help. Children at this age are often just learning "feeling words" so giving them the correct words can help them feel in control.

Join us for our
annual Halloween
Party @ HFN on
October 29th
from 11:30 to
1:00 pm.

Come to HFN and
listen to Stephanie
Creech speak at a
Parent Workshop
entitled
W.A.R. :
*Life Planning for
Women*
on October 21st at
7:00 pm.

Attention Working Parents

Although, you may not be able to attend playgroup due to your work hours; your child can attend with their childcare provider. If your child is being cared for by a friend or relative, that child care provider can attend playgroup or drop-in times with up to 3 children.



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Check our website for additional
events and information at
www.town.hull.ma.us
click on the Hull Schools link

This newsletter is a
collaboration of
Hull Family Network
&
Community Partnerships for
Children

Sponsored by grants from the
Massachusetts Department of Early
Education and Care

What is the Hull Family Network?

The Hull Family Network supports all parents and caregivers who have children prenatal through age three. Our goal is to help parents create and maintain a healthy family environment as well as to promote family well being through parent education and community support.

Funded by the Mass. Dept. of Early Education and Care through a grant to the Hull Public Schools, the Hull Family Network provides playgroups, parent education workshops, parent support groups, family activities, and information on parenting and community resources. By providing family recreational activities and playgroups, we hope to help parents build connections that will extend beyond the HFN Center and be a support to them. By providing parent education workshops, support groups, and having an extensive parenting lending library, we hope to help parents enhance their child-rearing skills.

Our programs are free to all residents of the town of Hull who are pregnant or have children through the age of three. Most of our programs are offered at our center which is located at 180 Harborview Rd. We are open Monday-Friday 8:30- 2:30, and Tuesday until 7:30 p.m. and are always happy to meet a new family.

Sweet Scarecrows

These autumn treats are so adorable and easy to assemble, they won't scare anyone away. In fact, set out a batch, and kids are sure to flock to them.

INGREDIENTS:

Cookies (ours were about 2 1/2 inches in diameter)
White frosting
Assorted sugar wafers (ours were 2 1/2 " long)
Candy corn
Mini chocolate chips
Bran cereal (we used Kellogg's All-Bran Extra Fiber)
Chocolate sprinkles



1. Frost the top of each cookie.
2. Cut a sugar wafer in half. Add a dollop of frosting to the top edge of the cookie and stick a wafer half to it for a hat top, as shown.
3. Place a whole sugar wafer just below the hat top for a brim. Use a little more frosting to decorate it with slices of candy corn or mini chocolate chips.
4. Press pieces of bran cereal hair into the frosting around the hat.
5. For the face, press on a candy corn nose, mini chocolate chip eyes, and a chocolate sprinkle stitched mouth.

