

The Decline of Play

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

PROVERB, *seventeenth century*

Why don't kids like to be "it"? Why, at the start of a game of tag, do they each call out, "Not it!" and then point to the loser, the last one to reject the role?

A provocative answer can be found by looking at the play of other mammals, most of which have some version of chasing games. In species that are predators, such as wolves, their pups seem to prefer to be the chasers. In species that are prey, such as rats, the pups prefer to be chased.¹ Our primate ancestors were both prey and predator, but they were prey for much longer. That may be why human children particularly enjoy practicing their fleeing and hiding skills.²

When seen from a distance, child's play is a strange thing. Peter LaFreniere, a developmental psychologist at the University of Maine, notes that children's play "combines the expenditure of great energy with apparently pointless risk."³ But if nearly all mammals do it, and if some of them get injured or eaten while doing it, it must offer some pretty powerful benefits to compensate for the risks.

It does. Play is essential for wiring a mammal's brain to create a functioning adult. Mammals that are deprived of play won't develop to their full capacity. In one experiment demonstrating this effect, rat pups were raised in one of three conditions: (1) totally alone in a cage; (2) alone except for one hour a day with a normal, playful young rat, during which time normal rough-and-tumble play occurred; and (3) same as condition 2, except that the visiting young rat was treated with a drug that knocked out rough-and-tumble play while

leaving other social behaviors, such as sniffing and nuzzling. When the young rats were later put into new situations, those that had engaged in rough-and-tumble play showed fewer signs of fearfulness and engaged in more exploration of the new environment.⁴

A key concept from developmental biology is “experience-expectant development.”⁵ Human beings have only about 22,000 genes, but our brains have approximately 100 billion neurons, with hundreds of trillions of synaptic connections. Our genes could never offer a codebook or blueprint for building anything so complex. Even if a blueprint could be passed down in our genes, it would not be flexible enough to build children who were well adapted to the vast range of environments and problems that our wandering species has gotten itself into. Nature found a better way to wire our large brains, and it goes like this: Genes are essential for getting the various cell lines started in the embryo, and genes guide brain development toward a “first draft” in utero. But experience matters, too, even while the baby is in the uterus; and after birth, it matters enormously. Experience is so essential for wiring a large brain that the “first draft” of the brain includes a strong motivation to practice behaviors that will give the brain the right kind of feedback to optimize itself for success in the environment that happens to surround it. That’s why young mammals are so keen to play, despite the risks.

It’s easy to see how this works with language in humans: The genes get the ball rolling on the development of brain structures for language, but the child must actually encounter and practice a language to finish the process. The linguistic brain is “expecting” certain kinds of input, and children are therefore motivated to engage in back-and-forth reciprocal exchanges with others in order to get that input. It’s fun for them to exchange sounds, and later, real words, with other people. A child who was deprived of these linguistic interactions until puberty would be unable to fully acquire a language or learn to speak normally, having missed the “critical period” for language learning that is part of the normal developmental process.⁶

It’s the same logic for physical skills (such as fleeing from predators) and social skills (such as negotiating conflicts and cooperation). The genes get the ball rolling on the first draft of the brain, but the brain is “expecting” the

child to engage in thousands of hours of play—including thousands of falls, scrapes, conflicts, insults, alliances, betrayals, status competitions, and acts of exclusion—in order to develop. Children who are deprived of play are less likely to develop into physically and socially competent teens and adults.⁷

Research on play has increased rapidly since 1980. Evidence for the benefits of play is now strong, and there’s a growing body of scholarship—suggestive though not conclusive—linking play deprivation to later anxiety and depression.⁸ As stated in one review of this literature:

Research has shown that anxious children may elicit overprotective behavior from others, such as parents and caretakers, and that this reinforces the child’s perception of threat and decreases their perception of controlling the danger. Overprotection might thus result in exaggerated levels of anxiety. Overprotection through governmental control of playgrounds and exaggerated fear of playground accidents might thus result in an increase of anxiety in society. We might need to provide more stimulating environments for children, rather than hamper their development [emphasis added].⁹

Given this research, and given the rising levels of adolescent anxiety, depression, and suicide, which we described in chapter 7, our educational system and parenting practices should offer kids more time for free play. But in fact, the opposite has happened.

In this chapter, we investigate why the most beneficial forms of play have declined sharply since the 1970s, and we ask what effects this change in childhood might have on teens and college students. The decline of unsupervised free play—including ample opportunities to take small risks—is our fourth explanatory thread.

The Decline of Free Play

Peter Gray, a leading researcher of play, defines “free play” as “activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own

sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity itself."¹⁰ Piano lessons and soccer practice are not free play, but goofing around on a piano or organizing a pickup soccer game are. Gray and other researchers note that all play is not equal. Vigorous physical free play—outdoors, and with other kids—is a crucial kind of play, one that our evolved minds are “expecting.” It also happens to be the kind of play that kids generally say they like the most.¹¹ (There is also a good case to be made for the importance of imaginative or pretend play,¹² which is found not only in less rambunctious kinds of indoor free play but often in rough-and-tumble outdoor free play as well.)

Gray notes the tendency of kids to introduce danger and risk into outdoor free play, such as when they climb walls and trees, or skateboard down staircases and railings:

They seem to be dosing themselves with moderate degrees of fear, as if deliberately learning how to deal with both the physical and emotional challenges of the moderately dangerous conditions they generate. . . . All such activities are fun to the degree that they are moderately frightening. If too little fear is induced, the activity is boring; if too much is induced, it becomes no longer play but terror. Nobody but the child himself or herself knows the right dose.¹³

Unfortunately, outdoor physical play is the kind that has declined the most in the lives of American children. The study that offers the clearest picture of the relevant trends was carried out in 1981 by sociologists at the University of Michigan, who asked parents of children under thirteen to keep detailed records of how their kids spent their time on several randomly chosen days. They repeated the study in 1997, and found that time spent in any kind of play went down 16% overall, and much of the play had shifted to indoor activities, often involving a computer and no other children.¹⁴ This kind of play does not build physical strength and is not as effective at building psychological resilience or social competence, so the drop in real, healthy, sociable free play was much greater than 16%. That study compared

Generation X (who were kids in 1981) to Millennials (who were kids in 1997). Twenge’s analysis of iGen, the current generation of kids, shows that the drop in free play has accelerated. Compared with Millennials, iGen spends less time going out with friends, more time interacting with parents, and much more time interacting with screens (which can be a form of social interaction but can have some negative effects, as we discussed in chapter 7).¹⁵

Compared with previous generations, members of iGen have therefore had much less of the kind of unsupervised free play that Gray says is most valuable. They have been systematically deprived of opportunities to “dose themselves” with risk. Instead of enjoying a healthy amount of risk, this generation is more likely than earlier ones to avoid it. Twenge shows how responses have changed to the survey question “I get a real kick out of doing things that are a little dangerous.” From 1994 through 2010, the percentage of adolescents who agreed with that question held steady, in the low 50s. But as iGen enters the dataset, agreement drops, dipping to 43% by 2015. If members of iGen have been risk-deprived and are therefore more risk averse, then it is likely that they have a lower bar for what they see as daunting or threatening. They will see more ordinary life tasks as beyond their ability to handle on their own without help from an adult. It should not surprise us that anxiety and depression rates began rising rapidly on campus as soon as iGen arrived.

In contrast to the decreased time spent in play between 1981 and 1997, that same time-use study found that time spent in school went up 18%, and time spent doing homework went up 145%.¹⁶ Research by Duke University psychologist Harris Cooper indicates that while there are benefits to homework in middle school and high school, provided it’s relevant and in the right amount, achievement benefits in elementary school are smaller, and homework that isn’t realistic in length and difficulty can even decrease achievement.¹⁷ Yet elementary school students have seen an increase in homework over the past twenty years.¹⁸ Some schools even assign homework in kindergarten. (Lenore Skenazy told us that when she asked her son’s teacher why homework was being assigned in kindergarten, the teacher responded, “So they will be ready for homework in first grade.”¹⁹)

Why is this happening? Why have we deprived kids of the healthiest forms of play and given them more homework and more supervision instead? One of the major reasons for the decline of all forms of unsupervised outdoor activity is, of course, the unrealistic media-amplified fear of abduction, which we described in the previous chapter. In one large survey, published in 2004, 85% of mothers said that their children played outdoors less frequently than they themselves had played when they were the same age. When asked to select reasons to explain why their children didn't spend more time on outdoor play, 82% of the mothers chose "safety concerns," including the fear of crime.²⁰

But there's a second reason, a second fear that haunts American parents and children—particularly those in the middle class and above—far more than it did in the late twentieth century: the college admissions process.

Childhood as Test Prep

When the parents of Millennials and iGen were children, early education was very different than it is today. Take a look at a checklist from 1979²¹ that helped parents decide whether their six-year-old was ready to start first grade. It has just twelve items, and almost all of them are about physical and emotional maturation and independence—including one item that could get parents arrested today (#8).

IS YOUR CHILD READY FOR FIRST GRADE: 1979 EDITION

1. Will your child be six years, six months or older when he begins first grade and starts receiving reading instruction?
2. Does your child have two to five permanent or second teeth?
3. Can your child tell, in such a way that his speech is understood by a school crossing guard or policeman, where he lives?

4. Can he draw and color and stay within the lines of the design being colored?
5. Can he stand on one foot with eyes closed for five to ten seconds?
6. Can he ride a small two-wheeled bicycle without helper wheels?
7. Can he tell left hand from right?
8. Can he travel alone in the neighborhood (four to eight blocks) to store, school, playground, or to a friend's home?
9. Can he be away from you all day without being upset?
10. Can he repeat an eight- to ten-word sentence, if you say it once, as "The boy ran all the way home from the store"?
11. Can he count eight to ten pennies correctly?
12. Does your child try to write or copy letters or numbers?²²

Compare that to one from today. A checklist from a school in Austin, Texas, has thirty items on it, almost all of which are academic, including:

- Identify and write numbers to 100
- Count by 10's to 100, by 2's to 20, by 5's to 100
- Interpret and fill in data on a graph
- Read all kindergarten-level sight words
- Be able to read books with five to ten words per page
- Form complete sentences on paper using phonetic spelling (i.e., journal and story writing)²³

Kindergarten in 1979 was devoted mostly to social interaction and self-directed play, with some instruction in art, music, numbers, and the alphabet thrown in. Erika Christakis notes that kindergarten classrooms would have been organized to build social relationships and facilitate hands-on exploration (such as with blocks or Lincoln Logs) and imaginative and symbolic play (such as a store or housekeeping corner with props and

costumes). Back then, kindergarten, which for most children was a half day, probably looked more like what passes for a progressive preschool today, consisting of “open-ended free play, snack, singing songs with rhyming words for a little oral language exposure, a story, maybe an art project and some sorting games or block building for math awareness.”²⁴ Today, kindergarten is much more structured and sedentary, with children spending more time sitting at their desks and receiving direct instruction in academic subjects—known as the “drill and skill” method of instruction, but that teachers not-so-affectionately call “drill and kill.”²⁵ Such methods are sometimes effective ways to communicate academic information to older children, but they are not appropriate for use with young children. There is growing evidence that with young children, these methods can backfire and produce negative effects on creativity as well as on social and emotional development.²⁶

Researchers at the University of Virginia compared kindergarten classes in 1998 (composed of some of the last members of the Millennial generation) to kindergarten in 2010 and found that by 2010, the use of standardized tests in kindergarten was much more common. Teaching methods and classroom organization had changed, and far more time was spent on advanced reading and math content. The study also found that teachers’ academic expectations of kindergarteners in 2010 were far higher than they had been in 1998,²⁷ a trend that seems to continue. For example, today’s Common Core kindergarten math standards include “construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others,”²⁸ and reading skills include “read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.”²⁹

In response to things like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, state preschool standards, a general emphasis on testing, and then the introduction of Common Core standards, the preschool and kindergarten landscape has changed enormously.³⁰ Christakis laments that social time and play have been sacrificed in preschool to keep up with academic expectations for kindergarten readiness. As she reports, kindergarten teachers still claim that the most important skills for kindergarten are not academic but social and emotional (like listening and being able to take turns).³¹

Beginning in preschool and continuing throughout primary school,

children’s days are now more rigidly structured. Opportunities for self-direction, social exploration, and scientific discovery are increasingly lost to direct instruction in the core curriculum, which is often driven by the schools’ focus on preparing students to meet state testing requirements. Meanwhile, especially for wealthier kids, instead of neighborhood children finding one another after school and engaging in free play, children have after-school activities like music lessons, team sports, tutoring, and other structured and supervised activities.³² For younger children, parents schedule playdates,³³ which are likely to occur under the watchful eye of a parent.

For children of many educated parents with means, instead of afternoons and weekends spent hanging out with friends or resting, that nonschool time is increasingly used to cultivate skills that will allow those children to stand out later on in the college admissions game. It’s no wonder that parents work so hard to plan their children’s time. What eight-year-old has the foresight to play the tuba or girls’ golf—activities that might make them more attractive to colleges?³⁴ What thirteen-year-old has the organizational skills and forward thinking (not to mention transportation plan) to follow the advice of The Princeton Review, which urges students to increase their appeal to colleges by picking one community-service activity early on and sticking with it year after year, volunteering two hours a week through senior year?³⁵

The Resume Arms Race

It has become much more difficult to gain admission to the top U.S. universities. For example, in the 1980s and ’90s, Yale’s acceptance rate hovered around 20%. By 2003, the admission rate was down to 11% and in 2017 it was 7%.³⁶ So it makes sense that parents have increasingly teamed up with their children to help them pack their resumes with extracurricular activities. It’s what former Yale English professor William Deresiewicz calls “the resume arms race,” and any family that doesn’t come together to play the game puts their child at a disadvantage. “The only point of having more,” Deresiewicz explains in his book *Excellent Sheep*, “is having more than everybody else. Nobody needed 20,000 atomic warheads until the other

side had 19,000. Nobody needs eleven extracurriculars, either—what purpose does having them actually serve?—unless the other guy has ten.”³⁷

Given the fierce competition, parents in some social circles convey a sense of panic about children’s grades, even in middle school—as if not getting an A will determine the course of a child’s life. This would normally be a clear example of catastrophizing, but in some highly competitive school districts, it may not be entirely unrealistic. Julie Lythcott-Haims puts it like this: “Let’s say this is math. If they don’t get an A in sixth-grade math, it means they might not be on track to be in the highest level of math in high school, which means they won’t get into Stanford.”³⁸ So it isn’t surprising that so many parents are hovering and oversupervising, not just to ensure safety but to ensure that children do homework and prepare for tests.³⁹ Some of these parents may think that making sure their children do whatever it takes to succeed in advanced courses helps their children develop “grit.” But “grit is often misunderstood as perseverance without passion, and that’s tragic,” psychology professor Angela Duckworth, author of the book *Grit*, told us. “Perseverance without passion is mere drudgery.” She wants young people to “devote themselves to pursuits that are intrinsically fulfilling.”⁴⁰

The college admissions process nowadays makes it harder for high school students to enjoy school and pursue intrinsic fulfillment. The process “warps the values of students drawn into a competitive frenzy” and “jeopardizes their mental health,”⁴¹ says Frank Bruni, a *New York Times* columnist and author of *Where You Go Is Not Who You Will Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*. Nowhere is that more apparent than in suicide clusters at highly competitive high schools, such as those in Palo Alto, California, and the suburbs of Boston, which have been profiled in *The Atlantic*⁴² and *The New York Times*.⁴³ In a 2015 survey, 95% of students at Lexington High School in Massachusetts reported “a lot of stress” or “extreme stress” about their classes, and in a 2016 study, the Centers for Disease Control reported that the teen suicide rate in Palo Alto, California, was more than four times the national average.⁴⁴

And it is precisely these elite, wealthy, and hypercompetitive school districts that provide the largest share of students at the top universities in the United States.⁴⁵ “Students are prepared academically, but they’re not

prepared to deal with day-to-day life,” says Gray, “which comes from a lack of opportunity to deal with ordinary problems.”⁴⁶ One paradox of upper-middle-class American life is that some of the things parents and schools do to help kids get admitted to college may make them less able to thrive once they’re there.

Childhood as Democracy Prep

The effects of play deprivation and oversupervision may extend far beyond college. Steven Horwitz, an economist at Ball State University in Indiana, took the same research on play that we have reviewed in this chapter and worked out some possible consequences for the future of liberal democracies.⁴⁷ He drew on the work of political scientists Elinor Ostrom⁴⁸ and Vincent Ostrom,⁴⁹ both of whom studied how self-governing communities resolve conflicts peacefully. Successful democracies do this by developing a variety of institutions and norms that enable people with different goals and conflicting desires to resolve their problems while rarely appealing to the police or the state to coerce their fellow citizens. This is the “art of association” that so impressed Alexis de Tocqueville when he traveled through the United States in 1835.

Citizens of a democracy don’t suddenly develop this art on their eighteenth birthday. It takes many years to cultivate these skills, which overlap with the ones that Peter Gray maintains are learned during free play. Of greatest importance in free play is that it is always voluntary; anyone can quit at any time and disrupt the activity, so children must pay close attention to the needs and concerns of others if they want to keep the game going. They must work out conflicts over fairness on their own; no adult can be called upon to side with one child against another.

Horwitz points out that when adult-supervised activities crowd out free play, children are less likely to develop the art of association:

Denying children the freedom to explore on their own takes away important learning opportunities that help them to develop not

just independence and responsibility, but a whole variety of social skills that are central to living with others in a free society. If this argument is correct, parenting strategies and laws that make it harder for kids to play on their own pose a serious threat to liberal societies by flipping our default setting from “figure out how to solve this conflict on your own” to “invoke force and/or third parties whenever conflict arises.” This is one of the “vulnerabilities of democracies” noted by Vincent Ostrom.⁵⁰

The consequences for democracies could be dire, particularly for a democracy such as the United States, which is already suffering from ever-rising cross-party hostility⁵¹ and declining trust in institutions.⁵² Here is what Horwitz fears could be in store:

A society that weakens children’s ability to learn these skills denies them what they need to smooth social interaction. The coarsening of social interaction that will result will create a world of more conflict and violence, and one in which people’s first instinct will be increasingly to invoke coercion by other parties to solve problems they ought to be able to solve themselves.⁵³

This is what Greg began to see around 2013: increasing calls from students for administrators and professors to regulate who can say what, who gets to speak on campus, and how students should interact with one another, even in private settings. The calls for more regulation and the bureaucratic impulse to provide that regulation are the subject of our next chapter.

We end this chapter, however, on a more positive note. In contrast to all the un wisdom kids are exposed to in the form of the three Great Untruths, here is a better way to frame the experiences of childhood and adolescence. In June 2017, John Roberts, the chief justice of the United States, was invited to be the commencement speaker at his son’s graduation from middle school. Like Van Jones (whom we quoted in chapter 4),

Roberts understands antifragility. He wishes for his son’s classmates to have the sorts of painful experiences that will make them better people and better citizens.⁵⁴ Here is an excerpt from his speech:

From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don’t take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you’ll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they’re going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes.⁵⁵

In Sum

- The decline of unsupervised free play is our fourth explanatory thread. Children, like other mammals, need free play in order to finish the intricate wiring process of neural development. Children deprived of free play are likely to be less competent—physically and socially—as adults. They are likely to be less tolerant of risk, and more prone to anxiety disorders.
- Free play, according to Peter Gray, is “activity that is freely chosen and directed by the participants and undertaken for its own sake, not consciously pursued to achieve ends that are distinct from the activity

itself.” This is the kind of play that play experts say is most valuable for children, yet it is also the kind of play that has declined most sharply in the lives of American children.

- The decline in free play was likely driven by several factors, including an unrealistic fear of strangers and kidnapping (since the 1980s); the rising competitiveness for admission to top universities (over many decades); a rising emphasis on testing, test preparation, and homework; and a corresponding deemphasis on physical and social skills (since the early 2000s).
- The rising availability of smartphones and social media interacted with these other trends, and the combination has greatly changed the way American children spend their time and the kinds of physical and social experiences that guide the intricate wiring process of neural development.
- Free play helps children develop the skills of cooperation and dispute resolution that are closely related to the “art of association” upon which democracies depend. When citizens are not skilled in this art, they are less able to work out the ordinary conflicts of daily life. They will more frequently call for authorities to apply coercive force to their opponents. They will be more likely to welcome the bureaucracy of safetyism.

CHAPTER 10

The Bureaucracy of Safetyism

The sovereign power [or soft despot] extends its arms over the entire society; it covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated, minute, and uniform rules . . . it does not tyrannize, it hinders, it represses, it enervates, it extinguishes, it stupefies, and finally it reduces each nation to being nothing more than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*¹

Remember the thought experiment in chapter 2, in which you visited your campus counseling center and the psychologist there made you more anxious rather than less?

Now, imagine it’s a few days after your visit, and you receive an e-mail from the associate dean of students with “Conduct Policy Reminder” in the subject line. You open it nervously, wondering why the associate dean would be reminding you about the conduct policy. You can’t remember anything that might violate it. The note reads:

I received a report that others are worried about your well-being. I’d like to meet with you to discuss your options for support and see what I can do to help. . . . Engaging in any discussion of suicidal or self-destructive thoughts or actions with other students interfere with, or can hinder, their pursuit of education and community. It is important that you refrain from discussing these issues with other students and use the appropriate resources listed below. If you ir