

Physical Activity-Based Play at Risk Particularly for Children with Special Needs

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According to researchers like Dr. Joe L. Frost, traditional children's play is seriously at risk. Schools have abandoned recess and replaced it with programs that are supposed to help children do well in the high-stakes testing demanded by states and the national government alike.

Dr. Frost's article for the Journal of Play entitled, "How Adults Enhance or Mess Up Children's Play," asserts, "The loss of free recess play, physical education, and the arts contributes to the rapidly growing epidemic of obese kids and detracts from broad developmental cognitive, social, physical and emotional goals for children."

Others share Dr. Frost's concern. According to a first-of-its kind Gallup poll of elementary school principals, the overwhelming majority believe, "recess has a positive impact not only on the development of students' social skills, but also on achievement and learning in the classroom." These findings back up additional research that links more recess to better behavior and focus in the classroom.

So if physical activity-based play is at risk for children with typical abilities, how much more vulnerable is this element in the life of a child with a disability? Perhaps a lot more, due to one overriding aspect and that is "risk."

Parents of children with disabilities are naturally protective of their children. Often these parents have to deal with a lot of physical and health-related issues their child faces. It is natural for all parents to try and prevent their children from potential injury. But should parents discourage or even prevent their child from experiencing any risk, and at what cost?

Tim Gill is a British author who has written a book called, "No Fear, Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society." He believes parents have become too concerned with risk. Gill calls for a cultural shift from protection to one of resilience. Resilience is just one of the benefits Gill believes a child gets when he or she meets risk face-to-face. One does not have to think too hard about whether children with special needs would be better served in their lives if they have a healthy dose of resilience.

Kids climb things not for the view, but for the fun, the thrill that allows them to conquer a fear and have faith in their abilities. Children with disabilities need to foster these feelings as much or more than other children in society today. There are other reasons to consider more physical activities for kids with special needs.

Jacob Sattelmair and John J. Ratey presented research in their article for the Journal of Play entitled, "Physically Active Play and Cognition, An Academic Matter." They argue that physical activity is only healthy but improves cognitive performance. Their opening statement asserts, "There is much discussion both in the growing body of play literature and in public discourse regarding the role of physical activity in healthy child development. Learning, memory, concentration, and mood all have a significant bearing on a student's academic performance, and there is increasing evidence that physical activity enhances each."

Macy Kaiser, Director of the National Lekotek Center, a nonprofit dedicated to providing play opportunities to children with disabilities believes that physical play should have a role in all children's lives, even those with special needs. Kaiser advises that, "Parents need to balance their need to protect their child and the child's need to grow, learn and conquer barriers."

The research is clear, physical activity can deliver more to kids than just a healthier body. The child's mind, memory and mood get a whole lot out of it also. Parents of children with special needs should encourage their child to get physically active in ways that manage risk, but may not avoid it completely.

AblePlay is a website that researches, rates and reviews toys, and play sets for children with special needs at www.ableplay.org. AblePlay is sponsored by the National Lekotek Center, an authority on play and children with disabilities.

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