



**TESTIMONY OF KENNETH GINSBURG, MD, MS Ed, FAAP
ON BEHALF OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS**

**NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND
PUBLIC LANDS
AND
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS**

**“No Child Left Inside:
Reconnecting Kids with the Outdoors”**

May 24, 2006

Good morning. I appreciate this opportunity to testify today before the Natural Resources Subcommittees on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans and National Parks, Forests and Public Lands at this hearing, “*No Child Left Inside: Reconnecting Kids with the Outdoors.*” My name is Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, and I am proud to represent the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), a non-profit professional organization of 60,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical sub-specialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. For the past six years, I have served as a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Committee on Communications. I am an adolescent medicine specialist at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. I also serve as Director of Health Services at Covenant House of Pennsylvania, a shelter for homeless and disenfranchised youth. My major interest is resilience, the exploration of how individuals thrive despite adversity. I have authored the Academy book, “A Parent’s Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Your Child Roots and Wings.”

Play Is Essential to Healthy Child Development

Simply stated, play is the work of children. Play is essential to healthy development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth.¹ In January, the AAP published a new clinical report affirming the central importance of play for all children and addressing the marked decline in play time available to many children in the U.S. That statement, of which I was the lead author, marked the first time that the American Academy of Pediatrics considered that children’s play time was sufficiently endangered to warrant an official policy pronouncement in support of its importance. This hearing also recognizes that fact by highlighting the shrinking opportunities available for most children to engage in exploratory play outdoors.

Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.² Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development.³ It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact with the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers.⁴ As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges.⁵ Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills.⁶ When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue.

Play is integral to the academic environment. It ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development.

It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills.⁷ Social-emotional learning is best integrated with academic learning; it is concerning if some of the forces that enhance children's ability to learn are elevated at the expense of others. Play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social-emotional learning.

Play Has Additional Health Benefits

Child-driven play can have other benefits as well, most notably in promoting physical health. It has been suggested that encouraging unstructured play may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children, which is one important strategy in the resolution of the obesity epidemic.⁸ We are all aware of the alarming statistics with regard to obesity rates: the prevalence of overweight among children aged 6 to 11 has more than doubled in the past 20 years, going from 7% in 1980 to 18.8% in 2004. The rate among adolescents aged 12 to 19 more than tripled, increasing from 5% to 17.1%.⁹ Overweight and obesity increase children's risk for a range of health consequences, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, bone and joint problems, and sleep apnea. Overweight children often become overweight adults, and the effect of obesity on adult health is profound.

Children engaged in creative play frequently are also exercising in the process, adjusting their activities to their own physical and developmental capabilities. It has been suggested that efforts to reduce obesity might be more effective if they promoted "play" as opposed to "physical activity" or "exercise."¹⁰ Preschool children have been documented to engage in higher levels of physical activity while playing outdoors. If prevention is the key to reversing obesity trends, then encouraging outdoor play for children could be an important component of a comprehensive strategy.

Unstructured play time can reduce "screen time" dedicated to television and computer games as well. In sharp contrast to the health benefits of active, creative play and the known developmental benefits of an appropriate level of organized activities, there is ample evidence that passive entertainment such as television viewing and video games is not protective and, in fact, has some harmful effects.¹¹

Time for Free Play Has Been Markedly Reduced For Some Children

Despite the numerous benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for some children. This trend has even affected kindergarten children, who have had free play reduced in their schedules to make room for more academics.

Currently, many schoolchildren are given less free time and fewer physical outlets at school; many school districts have responded to pressure to improve academic performance by reducing time committed to recess, the creative arts, and even physical education in an effort to focus on reading and mathematics.¹² This change may have

implications on children's ability to store new information, because children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity.¹³ A change in academic instruction or class topic does not offer this clear-cut change in cognitive effort and certainly does not offer a physical release. Even a formal structured physical education class may not offer the same benefit as free-play recess.¹⁴ Reduced time for physical activity may be contributing to the discordant academic abilities between boys and girls, because schools that promote sedentary styles of learning become a more difficult environment for boys to navigate successfully.

Opportunities for Play in Nature

Play in an outdoor, natural environment allows children to explore both their world and their own minds. Surely many of us have treasured memories of time spent as a child in an untamed, natural place – perhaps the woods behind one's home, or a summer camp, or the first time camping out in a tent. Nature places virtually no bounds on the imagination and engages all of the senses. For all children, this setting allows for the full blossoming of creativity, curiosity, and the associated developmental advances.

The outdoors also presents marvelous opportunities for parents to interact with their children in a fashion that fosters both the development of the relationship and the child. Families may hike, fish, camp, or canoe together. Children and parents can explore the bugs and mushrooms of the forest floor, or observe the patterns of the pebbled stream. When parents observe their children in play or join with them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their child's vantage point as the child navigates a world perfectly created to fit his or her needs. The interactions that occur through play tell children that parents are fully paying attention to them and help to build enduring relationships.¹⁵ Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse their child's world learn to communicate more effectively with their child and are given another setting in which to offer gentle, nurturing guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing their parents an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of their perspective.

Play in nature provides children with opportunities for self-directed physical activity that can help promote physical health and reduce obesity. Unlike team sports, individual play in nature allows the child to tailor exercise to his or her own interests and abilities, often in conjunction with creative efforts. The great outdoors can move children away from the passive entertainment of computers and TV and into an interactive forum that engages both mind and body.

Impediments to Outdoor Play

The American Academy of Pediatrics has identified a number of factors that are currently contributing to the reduction of free play time available for children. These include but are not limited to the following:

- In many communities, children cannot play safely outside of the home unless they are under close adult supervision and protection;
- Children are being passively entertained through television or computer/video games;
- A national trend to focus on the academic fundamentals of reading and arithmetic decreases time left during the school day for recess, creative arts, and physical education;
- More families have a single head of household or 2 working parents and fewer multigenerational households in which grandparents and extended family members can watch the children, thereby creating the need for children to be involved in structured programming;
- Parents wishing to make the most effective use of limited time with their children often believe that facilitating their children to have every opportunity is the best use of that time. In other words, some parents believe that transporting children between activities represents better parenting than playfully and directly engaging with their children;
- Parents receive messages from a variety of sources stating that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need from the earliest ages, and that play may, in fact, be a waste of time; and
- The increasing rigor of the college admissions process, through which children are encouraged to build a college resume through both academic excellence and a wide variety of activities and volunteer efforts starting at younger ages, thereby reinforcing the sense that play and unscheduled time are wasteful.

Each of these issues presents unique challenges to any parent or community wishing to restore free play time for children. As such, there is no single solution that will address all of the issues for every community. For all children, however, advocates need to promote the implementation of those strategies known to promote healthy youth development and resiliency.

Recommendations

The AAP makes a range of recommendations for pediatricians in their interactions with families to help emphasize the importance of unstructured play for healthy child development. Many of those recommendations are equally relevant for our governmental policies, and so I would like to paraphrase them for your use today:

Policymakers should recognize that free play is a healthy, essential part of childhood. All children should be afforded ample, unscheduled, independent, nonscreen time to be creative, to reflect, and to decompress.

Governmental policies should emphasize that active child-centered play is a time-tested way of producing healthy, fit young bodies. This issue must be kept in mind when reauthorizing legislation including educational and fitness programs.

Federal agencies should support the development of "safe spaces" in underresourced neighborhoods. This may include initiatives such as opening school, library, or community facilities to be used by children and their parents after school hours and on weekends, or by establishing programs that help connect families with federal parks and lands.

The federal government should support a variety of physical activity opportunities for children in addition to school physical education programs. These should include the protection of children's recess time and the requirement of extracurricular physical activity programs and nonstructured physical activity before, during, and after school hours, that address the needs and interests of all students.

Federal policy should support the reduction of environmental barriers to an active lifestyle. The government should adequately fund programs that support families' efforts to engage in a healthy lifestyle, whether through large-scale efforts like creation and maintenance of public federal lands or local initiatives such as the construction of safe recreational facilities, parks, playgrounds, bicycle paths, sidewalks, and crosswalks.¹⁶

Federal efforts should build upon social marketing that promotes increased physical activity. Programs and initiatives at federal agencies can help promote active, healthy living as a normative lifestyle.¹⁷

In conclusion, I appreciate this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Academy applauds the subcommittees' efforts to bring attention to the issues associated with the health and developmental benefits of unstructured play in a natural environment. Federal policies can serve an important role in promoting opportunities for active, healthy living for all children, including through creative use of federal lands programs. We look forward to working with you to protect and promote the health and well-being of all children.

¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, Ginsburg, K., and the Committee on Communications and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. Clinical Report: The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds. *Pediatrics*. 2007; 119: 182.

² Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

³ Ibid, 183 (internal endnotes omitted).

⁴ Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

⁵ Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

⁶ Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

⁷ Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

⁸ Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

⁹ Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, McDowell MA, Tabak CJ, Flegal KM. Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity in the United States, 1999-2004. *JAMA* 2006; 295: 1549-1555.

¹⁰ Burdette HL, Whitaker RC. Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children: looking beyond fitness and fatness to attention, affiliation, and affect. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*. 2005; 159: 46-50.

¹¹ Ibid, 185 (internal endnotes omitted).

¹² Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

¹³ Ibid, 184 (internal endnotes omitted).

¹⁴ Ibid (internal endnotes omitted).

¹⁵ Ibid, 183 (internal endnotes omitted).

¹⁶ American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness and Council on School Health. Active Healthy Living: Prevention of Childhood Obesity Through Increased Physical Activity. *Pediatrics*. 2006;117:1834-1842.

¹⁷ Ibid.