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* HOW ADULTS ENHANCE OR MESS UP CHILDREN'S PLAY*

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> Traditional children's play is declining rapidly in the United States. Recess at schools (along with physical education and the arts) is being eliminated or reduced to make way for growing, misguided state and national policies of high stakes testing. Such testing, originating and enforced by politicians is widely opposed by national professional organizations and teachers themselves. 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.

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> A second way that adults are messing up children's play is shared by parents and teacher's alike. Computer play, television, and video games, potentially valuable tools for literacy and cognition, are poorly supervised, available selectively in poor and rich homes and schools, and used as baby sitters. Children's growing addiction to sexual and violent video games and risky chat rooms replace outdoor play and its wide range of developmental benefits.

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> Adults also mess up children's play by posing as poor models, engaging in the same television and computer practices they ostensibly reject for their children. they spend too little time with children to pass on the rich heritage of play they may have enjoyed as children. They protect their kids from contacts with other adults, creating paranoia and denying them rich links with their past. This is particularly true in cities where kids frequently avoid eye contact or conversation with adults. Conversely, country kids, not so directly exposed to criminal behavior, may themselves initiate conversations with adults. Adults mess up by exposing kids to fatty, calorie laden food at home and school, fast food venues, and "eat all you can hold" restaurants. Many fat kids spend their childhoods avoiding social play and physical activity, often becoming isolates on the playground, and can look forward to becoming fat adults with early social and health problems. Such adult mess-ups result in stressed-out kids who look to pills for making it through the day.

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> Adults enhance children's play by ensuring extensive time for free, outdoor play, by teaching children about nature through hands-on experiences, and they enhance development by BALANCING play with physical work, technology play, academics, and quiet times for doing nothing and reflecting. They enhance play and development by infusing playful qualities into work while holding high expectations for achievement. They enhance play by teaching and modeling behaviors that reflect good health and fitness practices - practices that result in physically fit children with skills that help ensure their safety at play. Adults enhance play when they consider the uniqueness of children when devising assessment schemes. Unhappy, stressed out children do not make happy players

(play is by definition fun) and may become stressed out adults who in turn become poor models for the next generation.

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> How do adults mess up children's playgrounds? Modern playgrounds and opportunities for play have essentially been "dumbed down" (for children's cognitive, social, and creative development) in deference to safety standards, fear of injury and liability, and the political obsession with academic testing. Typical school and community playgrounds are increasingly standardized, including a complex superstructure and swings. Creative elements are sidelined or eliminated if they are not "certified" to meet safety standards. Such cautions are often unwittingly applied even to natural elements - trees, streams, hills, rocks, and vegetation. Despite such widespread cautions, the incidence of injury on playgrounds has increased significantly since the introduction of national safety standards. Several factors may help account for this - decrease in children's physical fitness and free time for play, increase in sedentary activity and growing numbers of preschool children enrolling in public schools and using play equipment designed for older children.

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> Adults enhance playgrounds by involving children in the creation of rich, creative playgrounds combining motor apparatus with natural features. Manufactured play equipment including slides, swings, climbing and overhead apparatus, and even merry-go-rounds and seesaws (nearing extinction), properly designed, installed and maintained, are reasonably safe and extremely valuable for perceptual-motor and social development. However, their broad developmental values pale in contrast to those of traditional games, sand and water, nature areas, gardens, animal habitats, and building areas where children are free to create, construct, and use their imaginations. Such areas are further enhanced by the provision of storage facilities and a rich array of portable materials or "loose parts" for creating, constructing and nurturing. Children need exciting, creative playgrounds AND sensitive adults with time and desire to allow and pass on the rich heritage of play without undue interference.

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