

The Stress of Structure

Because of changes in Canadian society, children today tend to start structured activities at a younger age than their grandparents or even their parents did. By the time they are in kindergarten, many children spend most of their week in school, child care and a variety of other scheduled activities. Often they have little time left for just plain play.

Is all this activity enriching or exhausting? Stimulating or stressful? Does it encourage certain areas of development while neglecting others? When finding the balance, it is important to keep in mind that free play continues to contribute to all aspects of children's development long after they start school.

Child-led learning

When they play, children have opportunities to solve technical problems, correct mistakes, negotiate conflicts, get physical exercise, improve coordination, express emotions and work out tensions. Perhaps the most important quality of free play is that children direct it themselves: they make the rules and decide when to start, stop and change direction.

Finding a balance

Parents and caregivers will make choices between planned activities and unstructured play according to their own situation and their children's needs. Here are a few factors to think about when looking for a balance:

- **Monitor the stress level** - Older children may be able to clearly tell you that they're doing too much, but look for signs of stress in their behaviour too. Stress caused by time pressures often shows up as frequent frustration, anger and swings from being overexcited to very tired. (While you're at it, check to see if *you're* showing signs of strain too.) If you see those signals, it's time to cut back and allow for some downtime and daydreaming. In general, children in primary school are comfortable with at most one extracurricular activity during the week and another one on weekends.
- **Limit screen time** - Time spent in front of the TV, computer and video games may be relaxing and even educational, but it leaves less time available for unstructured play. Whether at home or in after-school programs, resist the temptation to let the screen think for children. Set up stimulating play

spaces with multi-purpose props like blocks, big cardboard boxes, dress-up clothes and accessories, then let their imagination guide them. Take them outdoors where they can be inspired by structures for climbing and sand for digging (or snow for building).

- **Let them work through boredom** - If children are used to having all their time planned, they may find it hard at first to invent their own pastimes. You may also find it hard not to move in and organize them. Make a few suggestions, but then step back and let them rediscover their own resourcefulness. Sometimes it helps to brainstorm a list of possible activities with them first so that when you hear "There's nothing to do!", you can point to the list and they can choose.
- **Ease up on competition** - As they get older, children learn to play games with rules and with winners and losers. But they also still enjoy just playing catch or shooting a few baskets at the park with no one keeping score. Allow time and space for both kinds of activities.
- **Recognize the value in the process** - Exploratory play is not like piano lessons where you can judge progress by the end-of-year recital. In play, the learning is in the process, not the end result. Support this kind of learning by not expecting your children to produce a perfect final product that follows a model example. For instance, when children try out a new craft, concentrate on what they've learned from exploring unfamiliar materials. Recognize all that your children are discovering and practising when they make up a new game, design and build a go-cart or invent their own choreography to their favourite music.
- **Allow for amateurism** - Don't be too quick to sign those amateur choreographers up for a dance class. Just because they like showing off their moves in the living room doesn't mean they want the discipline of weekly practice. Similarly, children who like splashing around in the pool don't necessarily want to sign up for swimming and diving lessons. Let them enjoy doing things their own way and splash around with them.
- **Join in the fun** - Downtime and unstructured play are good for adults too. Every now and then, leave your plans behind and let your children lead you into their world of spontaneity.

by Betsy Mann