

## **Let's Play**

### **Patty Balmer**

Have you ever reminisced about when you were a child? Have you ever turned your living room into a fort by pulling the blankets off of your beds so that you could pretend you were living in the wilderness? Did you play man hunt or hide and seek with all of the neighborhood kids? Do you remember changing the rules or making new rules for a game? I do. I sometimes long for those carefree days. It turns out that all of that imaginative, unstructured play and rule-making we enjoyed as children taught us self control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, which are elements of a critical cognitive skill called executive function.

In this age of over worked parents, technology, scheduled music lessons, team sports, and dance classes, creative play is becoming a thing of the past. This generation is at risk of losing out on valuable play time. Adele Diamond, professor of developmental cognitive neuroscience at the University of British Columbia, explains that children need creative play time each day. Diamond maintains that it is through imaginative play that children build important life skills such as self regulation, control over their emotions and behavior, the ability to resist impulses, and the ability to exert self discipline. Diamond's research concludes that these important skills are better predictors of a child's success in school than a child's IQ. Diamond's research also states that children with poor executive function have higher rates of school dropout, drug use and crime. She noted that children who participated in free play throughout the day often focused better in school and had less behavioral problems because they learned how to control their actions and impulses.

These new findings are a call for all parents and teachers to begin encouraging children to engage in more creative play. Children should have daily free time that is not organized or dictated by toys, television, or video games. Diamond recommends that children engage in make-believe play that enables them to find objects in their environment and make up the rules of the activity. For example, children can use blankets to create a tent in the living room and then pretend the tent is their house in the wilderness or an igloo on the frozen tundra near the North Pole. This means getting kids to shift back to the time

before television, video games, and organized activities. Kids should use their imaginations to play school, man hunt, and freeze tag. They should pretend to be cops and robbers and create stories to act out. These free play opportunities are essential for the cognitive development of this generation of children. Let's all engage our children in some good old fashioned imaginative play.

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