

PARENTING, PLAY, & PUBLIC HEALTH

by Julia Chapman & Kimberly Kopko

PLAY & CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Play is an important part of children's development: it **promotes learning**, is **restorative**, offers children a **sense of control**, and allows for **creativity and discovery**.

Play builds parts of the brain that help children **self-regulate and control their own behavior and emotions**.

Play is an opportunity for **parents** to engage with their children, **foster their curiosity, promote their development, and build connections in the parent-child relationship**.

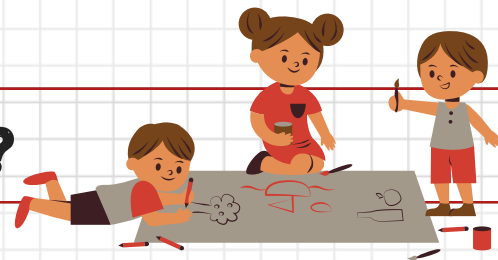
WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF PLAY?

Studies show that **play has decreased** since the 1980s.

Parents attribute **community factors**, including **fewer children being outside** in general, a **fear of being seen as negligent** by others if children are playing independently, and **worries about safety** within their community.

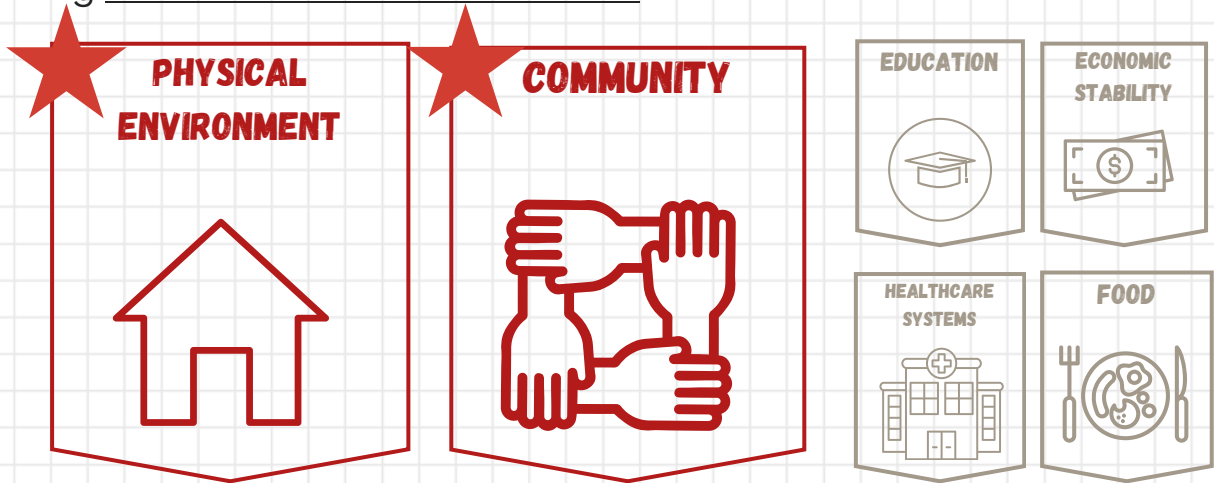
There are also factors within the **physical environment** including increased access to screens. When children engage in **more screen time**, they often engage in **less physical or social play**. This may lead to children feeling **more isolated**, their attention may be split more often, and they may spend **less time exploring** or taking (age appropriate) risks.

During the time that play has decreased, rates of children experiencing anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues have increased. While a direct causal relationship is difficult to determine, as mental health issues are complex, there are reasons to believe (like the ones above) that play and mental health are related.



FROM A PUBLIC HEALTH LENS...

...play is an important factor in improving children's social and emotional health outcomes. It impacts and is impacted by **social determinants of health**



SO...WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?



When we put it all together, the goal is to foster **active, community based, and independent play activities**.

Parents can help:

- Initiate a conversation with their child that fosters agency and autonomy: **“What is something that you really like to do, and that you would like to do on your own or without my help?”**
- Restore play-based activities with other children. **Plan play dates** with family members and/or other children in the community when possible.
- Coordinate with parents, teachers, and other important adults in the community to work together to **establish new norms on rolling back phone-based activities** (like the ‘Wait Til 8th’ pledge).
- **Explore alternatives to screen-based entertainment**, like outdoor play, play with wooden toys, or play dates.
 - *Studies show that minimizing screen time for children younger than two years is helpful for child development!*

References:

Kopko, K. (2024, May 22). *Applying parenting education practices to contemporary issues: A play-based approach* [Keynote presentation]. NYSPEP Annual Training Institute, Albany, NY, United States

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