
Reading the Signs of the Times

The American Academy of Pediatrics Recognizes the Importance of Play

— Nancy Blanning

It is with special pleasure that this “Signs of the Times” can celebrate a change in attitude toward the importance of play. This August, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a new clinical report that affirms the importance—even necessity—of unstructured, open-ended play for healthy childhood development. This breakthrough research was provocatively announced in the Los Angeles Times:

Imagine a drug that could enhance a child’s creativity, critical thinking and resilience. Imagine that this drug were simple to make, safe to take, and could be had for free.

The nation’s leading pediatricians say this miracle compound exists. In a new clinical report, they are urging doctors to prescribe it liberally to the children in their care.

What is this wonder drug? Play.

The study details the shift in educational policies dating from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which emphasized academics for young children. Recess, play time, and unstructured moments in the school day were increasingly reduced to make time for direct instruction. The Alliance for Childhood pointed out the dangers of this shift in a 2009 report, “Crisis in the Kindergarten,” by Edward Miller and Waldorf educator Joan Almon. This new report confirms the conclusions of the “Crisis” paper, and adds new research to emphasize that play is critical to healthy development for “whole child readiness [for school] including social-emotional, attentional, and cognitive skills.”

The AAP report provides us professional research vocabulary to explain what we know to be true about child development fostered by play. For example: “Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (i.e., the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.”

The full study, “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children,” is worth our time and attention to read. It can be accessed and downloaded from pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2018/08/16/peds.2018-2058.