

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play

POLICY BRIEF

EVERY CHILD DESERVES A BREAK

WE BELIEVE

- CHILDREN are the foundation of the world's future.
- CHILDREN have always played in all cultures throughout history.
- PLAY, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is vital to developing the potential of all children.
- PLAY is communication and expression, combining thought and action; it gives satisfaction and a feeling of achievement.
- PLAY is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous.
- PLAY helps children develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially.
- PLAY is a means of learning to live, not a mere passing of time. (Source adapted from IPAWORLD.org)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ✓ Principals need to provide a permission structure for teachers to provide authentic opportunities for choice within the classroom.
- ✓ Parents/families must work with their school to increase the time and the number of school recesses daily.
- ✓ Superintendents and Principals should implement the Liink Project within their schools.
- ✓ Policymakers need to refocus efforts on school readiness through the lens of whole child development and move away from the current focus on the cognitive domain of development.
- ✓ A focus on overprotection and safety is limiting children's development. Though safety is important, many must learn to assess whether something is a hazard or an opportunity to take an acceptable risk.

THE BENEFITS OF DOING SOMETHING	THE COST OF DOING NOTHING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Research shows nothing activates a child's brain and whole child development like unstructured, outdoor play (Levitin, 2021; Medina, 2014; Rhea, 2021). ✓ The Liink intervention has shown that when recess is offered throughout each school day for a total of 60 minutes, standardized test scores improve, and children begin to thrive in the school environment (Rhea, 2024). ✓ When students have choice, they have increased intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2002). They feel a sense of autonomy and can exercise their agency, which leads to a willingness to consistently engage in tasks while also developing a persistence to persevere through challenging endeavors (Stone, 2024). ✓ Children also increase their interest and enjoyment in activities when they choose to participate. This sense of ownership is critical to a child's ability and willingness to engage (Stone, 2024). ✓ The freedom to make choices in school environments significantly contributes to active engagement, leading to increased academic performance and achievement (Stone, 2024). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ As a nation, we have moved farther and farther away from what children need in school and focused more and more on what adults want and expect from children. The U.S. wants to be at the top educationally, but current policies and expectations interfere with this goal (Rhea, 2024). ✓ Standardized tests contribute to a large majority of children exhibiting chronic stress and burnout by third grade (Rhea, 2021). The emotional and cognitive pressures and the extended preparation for a test score versus well-rounded content have removed whole child developmental needs from the elementary school setting (Rhea, 2024). ✓ The lack of school recess throughout each day has led to less time on task and lower academic scores, all while showing a sharp increase in an external locus of control (things happen to me), narcissism, and emotional instability (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression, suicide, homicide) (Gray, 2017; Rhea, 2024). ✓ Instead of continuing an approach that is not working, Liink's intent is to change existing sedentary and indoor school cultures with outdoor, risky, child-directed play breaks (recess), implementing the protocol and

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Students need opportunities to choose how an assignment can be completed, such as whether it is a poster, a presentation, a paper, etc. ✓ Providing opportunities throughout the school day for children to play without adult restrictions allows children to explore different possibilities, problem-solve, and promote creative thinking (Stone, 2017; 2024). ✓ Children with the freedom to make important choices in the classroom will be highly engaged, develop a propensity for a life-long love of learning, and experience a healthier overall well-being (Stone, 2024). ✓ Teachers should build choice-driven environments that capitalize on the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness while recognizing that play is a significant factor in a free classroom where children can be self-directed (Stone, 2024). ✓ Whitebread et al. (2009) suggest that play is a critical factor in developing children’s problem-solving skills and creativity, which require substantial levels of metacognitive and self-regulatory skills. Moreover, Whitebread et al. note that these skills are “crucially important in the development of academic skills” (p. 40). They conclude that “children’s play makes a significant contribution to their development as learners, and that this has implications for the quality of their thinking, problem-solving and creativity” (p. 41). ✓ Play, which involves freedom of choice, differs from play structured and directed by adults. Free play supports children’s overall physical and mental health (Chlebowski & Marcello, 2024). ✓ Free Play helps children develop critical skills and competencies such as appropriate risk-taking, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and social skills, self-regulation, empathy, the development of independence, self-esteem, and confidence (Spencer et al., 2019; Chlebowski & Marcello, 2024). ✓ Risk is important in children’s play because it helps them develop a variety of skills and abilities, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management: Children learn to assess risks and develop strategies to manage them. • Confidence: Children gain confidence and self-esteem by overcoming challenges. • Resilience: Children learn to be resilient and cope with positive stress. • Problem-solving: Children learn to solve problems and resolve conflicts. • Physical literacy: Children increase their activity levels and develop physical coordination. • Social-emotional skills: Children learn to cooperate, communicate, and feel a sense of belonging. • Independence: Children learn to do things for themselves and understand their limits. • Self-awareness: Children learn to understand themselves and their relationship to the world (Boston University, 2020, retrieved from https://www.bu.edu/childrens-center/files/2020/07/Risky-Play.pdf). 	<p>procedures established in the LiINK program (Rhea, 2024).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Many teachers take away recess as a form of punishment, but recess is critical to a child’s play, physical development, and decision-making capacity (Stone, 2024). ✓ Due to a variety of limitations and constraints on freedom, children and adolescents today are highly likely to experience anxiety and depression because “without a healthy sense of control, [they] feel powerless and overwhelmed (Stixrud & Johnson, 2018, p. 2). Schools significantly contribute to these limitations by reducing or eliminating opportunities for freedom and for children and adolescents to make meaningful choices (Stone, 2024). ✓ Schools often appear to provide children with choices, but these choices are typically meaningless and provide no real benefit. This approach does not allow the child to make an important real-world decision with real consequences that reflect the child’s understanding and interests. This could mean the differences between engagement and disengagement, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, authentic learning, and superficial memorization (Stone, 2024). ✓ Children continually deprived of meaningful choices and precluded from authentically playing during school hours experience adverse impacts of this void of freedom. They present as stressed, anxious, and depressed and exhibit a lack of motivation and engagement to perform well in school (Abeles, 2016; Strauss, 2016; Robinson, 2015; Stone, 2024). ✓ Today’s children have far fewer opportunities for self-directed free play outdoors. Urbanization, a perceived fear of strangers among adults, concerns about traffic, the prioritization of academic learning, rapidly increasing hours per day of screen use, and the overscheduling of children’s lives have all contributed to a decline in children’s play (Singer & Hirsh-Pasek, 2005; Chlebowski & Marcello, 2024). ✓ Playgrounds play an essential role, but when we start to think about safety, professionals who understand children’s play more broadly assess these playgrounds as “too safe,” to the point that children become bored and look elsewhere for risk and/or challenge, often in places unintended by adults (Chlebowski & Marcello, 2024). ✓ Today’s playgrounds are not vibrant, child-centered play environments that offer children the sustained, joyful, self-directed free play they crave and the bodies and minds they need for healthy development and well-being (Chlebowski & Marcello, 2024). ✓ The most important thing adults can do to understand children’s play and improve access to stimulating environments is to assess the current environments where children play. While playground safety assessments exist and are standard practice, tools that assess play value, play materials, access to nature, risk, and changeability are limited (Chlebowski & Marcello, 2024).
---	--



IPA USA Vision, Mission, and Guiding Principles

Vision Statement:

A world where all children can play

Purpose/Mission Statement (from Bylaws):

IPA USA aims to protect, preserve, and promote the child's right to play.

What is Play?

Play is the work of childhood. Play is biologically driven. There are many types of play. The highest, purest form of play is spontaneous, freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, pleasurable, purposeless, and free from conflicts. For younger children, it also contains symbolism and elements of pretend.

Guiding Principles

- Play, along with the basic needs of nutrition, health, shelter, and education, is **vital for the development of all children from birth to 18 years**.
- Play is **integral and necessary** for social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development.
- Play **facilitates brain growth**, especially in the frontal cortex, where essential cognitive functions reside, including attention, self-regulation, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, all known as executive function.
- Many foundational skills can only be developed **through play** and thus justify the essential need for recess for younger children and breaks for older children.
- Play opportunities are **needed for children both indoors and outdoors**.
- Play needs differ **among the age groups**: birth to age 2, pre-k, early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school.
- Schools, especially pre-K and elementary schools, **need help understanding** that young children learn best through play.
- Schools need help and support in providing meaningful and appropriate play opportunities, such as experiential, inquiry, integrated, and emergent approaches to curriculum.
- **Families need help** recognizing that play is necessary for healthy development, and that family play also bonds the family and helps build happy childhoods.
- **Community services and regulators**, such as parks and recreation, city planning, playground inspectors, and housing developments, need help understanding why opportunities for risky play should be included in their planning.
- All types of play are essential (e.g., physical play, such as running, climbing, swinging, etc.; block and construction play; play within art and music; games with rules; rough and tumble play; risky play; nature play; role-playing; etc.), but **child-directed, spontaneous play** is the most important type of play during the early years of birth through age eight.
- Children have the right to play as guaranteed by the 1989 [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).

The IPA USA's 50th Anniversary White Paper is a comprehensive resource of 57 articles written by a group of dedicated authors, to support advocacy efforts in addressing the child's right to play. To learn more about this topic or to review other topics in the IPA USA 50th Anniversary White Paper, please visit IPAUSA.org. Questions? Email ipausa2019user@gmail.com. IPA USA is here to support you in your work.