

# The American Association for the Child's Right to Play

## POLICY BRIEF

### Play Across the Lifespan

#### 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

- **"We are designed to be lifelong players, built to benefit from play at any age"** (Stuart Brown, 2000, p. 48)
- **Recognize the importance of play across the lifespan to engage with others, relieve anxiety, and**
- **Recognize play as the primary learning mode for children from Birth to Eight and its impact on laying the foundation of future development.**
- **Educators who were robbed of their childhood and required to sit quietly and be passive while adults instructed them need to experience the joy of play in order to implement child-initiated play in the classrooms.**

THE BENEFITS OF DOING SOMETHING	THE COST OF DOING NOTHING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ "Adults have childhood amnesia; if they could remember their childhood, they would not do what they are currently doing to children (Bev Bos, 1991).</li> <li>✓ We must provide children with experiences that awaken meaningful discovery, insight, creative expression, and joy, so it is imperative that we provide early childhood professionals with the time and space to experience those dispositions through play themselves (Bedard, 2024).</li> <li>✓ Play experiences and repetition build strong neural pathways that lay the foundation for brain development. Much of infant and toddler play results from urges the toddler cannot control to engage in repetitive motions and behaviors. These behaviors are called play schema, first observed and recognized by Jean Piaget. (Beloglovsky &amp; Daly, 2015; Edwards, 2024; Sluss, 2024).</li> <li>✓ The most effective way children learn to monitor and regulate themselves is through child-initiated play experiences.</li> <li>✓ Foundational descriptions of play and learning interaction come from Piaget, Vygotsky, and more current writers and researchers. From Jean Piaget (1962), we see the basic tenets of child-initiated play: pleasurable, spontaneous, voluntary, intrinsically motivated, flexible, and a natural product of physical and cognitive growth (Jackson, 2024).</li> <li>✓ Play is how younger students learn about the world around them. For middle school children, removing play reduces the focus on social-emotional learning (SEL), hindering empathy development (Bongiorno &amp; Quinn, 2021; Yaure, 2024).</li> <li>✓ To address the lack of play in middle school classrooms, teachers should include interactive board games to teach content and increase social-emotional learning. Board games are, by nature, a method of communication and problem-solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Technology is one of the biggest threats to children's opportunities to play, and it can exist in the home, school, or childcare setting. Though technology is a part of our daily lives, electronic devices have become the standard entertainment for children in many situations, replacing child-initiated play (Jackson, 2024).</li> <li>✓ Dysregulation among kindergarten children and expulsion from preschool has increased (Blair &amp; Diamond, 2008). The data is staggering, and the situations are incredibly concerning from societal and educational perspectives. The increases in dysregulation can be attributed to executive function deficiencies (Jackson, 2024).</li> <li>✓ Underrepresented children attending schools in communities with lower socioeconomic status are even more at risk due to less access and greater restriction of recess as a disciplinary strategy (Tsai et al., 2024; Galaviz et al., 2021). The importance of unstructured playtime in primary schools should be recognized and promoted. It is not just a break from academic work but a crucial part of a child's physical and mental development (Bristow &amp; Atkinson, 2020; Yogman et al., 2018; Brigden &amp; Marlett, 2024).</li> <li>✓ In today's readiness climate, a child's primary-age experience offers less play at school, less at home, and less in the community. This has resulted in significantly less time dedicated to engaging in the single most necessary source of development: child-initiated play. A sizable obstacle is the changing perception that play is a break from academics versus the reality of the critical contributions to development that occur during play (Brigden &amp; Marlett, 2024).</li> </ul>

that encourages students to consider new avenues of winning depending on various factors. Since most games are based on securing victory points or achieving a goal, students must apply statistics, social cues, or deduction knowledge to win. Whether it is a new strategy they have researched or a new line of thinking to try and outwit opponents, board games require students to think outside the box in a way that worksheets do not (Yaure, 2024).

- ✓ College-aged individuals can benefit from regular play as part of their day-to-day experiences, and many of the positive outcomes are similar to what is evident in younger children (Dean & Wenner, 2024). When college students participate in play, they can experience a reduction in stress, enhanced creativity, increased academic performance/learning, authentic connections with peers, greater motivation and engagement, and an overall improved mood (Forbes, 2021; Gordon, 2014; Leather et al., 2021; Pang & Proyer, 2018; Togsverd & Pedersen, 2024). It has also been noted that playful adults live approximately ten years longer than less playful adults (Gordon, 2014).
- ✓ For play to be supported within college students' day-to-day lives, we make the following recommendations: (1) opportunities for play within campus life, (2) incorporating play into college courses, (3) shifting societal norms, and (4) conducting more empirical research on play at the college level (Dean & Wenner 2024).
- ✓ Good play facilitation and responsive teaching require an intentional adult role – one of enriching and expanding children's ideas, interactions, and explorations....It takes practice for adults to become intentional and tactful in this way. However, doing so is especially important in play contexts because the playful part vanishes as soon as children's sense of ownership is stifled (Jensen et al., 2019, p. 20).
- ✓ Play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith indicated that play is the opposite of depression, partly because play involves "the willful belief in acting out one's own capacity for the future" (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 198).
- ✓ The science of play confirms play as a means to help lift college students from their troubles and to help prevent mental health issues from arising in the first place (Holzman, 2016; Sundstrom, 2024).
- ✓ Adults need to **play** (Parker et al., 2022)! Studies know that play reduces stress by triggering the release of endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals (Parker et al., 2022). It promotes relaxation and helps shift your focus away from everyday worries. Play encourages imagination and creativity (Zermeno, 2024).
- ✓ In the demanding world of early childhood education, educators' well-being and satisfaction are essential to promoting effective nurturing and development in young children. With increasing challenges and stress in educational environments, fostering a culture of adult play within the workforce is a compelling strategy to enhance job satisfaction and retention among early childhood educators (Beloglovsky, 2024).
- ✓ Adult play, often misconstrued as frivolous or unproductive, holds substantial psychological and physiological benefits. It is a state of engagement that induces creativity, stress relief, and joy. For educators, integrating play into their professional lives can lead to remarkable improvements in mental health, work satisfaction, and interpersonal relations. Through activities that stimulate the mind, foster social connection, and encourage physical activity, adult play offers a holistic approach to enhancing educators' quality of life and work. It also helps adults prioritize the importance of play in children's lives. The more we play as adults, the more we will promote the importance of play in children's lives (Beloglovsky, 2024).

- ✓ As students reach middle school, they often see a decrease in time centered around play in favor of worksheets and quizzes. Recess and play have decreased since 2001, and over forty states do not require students to have recess. Middle school lesson plans focus more on presentations and exit tickets to assess student knowledge instead of unique play opportunities. One possible reason for this shift is that schools are expected to increase standardized test scores, and play is not seen as a way to prepare students for those tests. This common misconception can have drastic, negative impacts on students (Nix, 2022; Yaure, 2024).
- ✓ It is no surprise that today's generation of college students is highly connected to technology, given that they were raised in a tech-inundated world from birth until now. Young adults frequently engage in technology-based play on their phones, computers, gaming systems, and other electronic devices (Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust, 2019). Unfortunately, this often results in unhealthy addictions related to spending too much time on technological platforms, resulting in poor physical and mental health effects (Lattie et al., 2019). Other playful ventures for college students include drinking games (Wegner et al., 2019) and play within sex/courtship (see Ryan & Mohr, 2005). Although understanding the ramifications of these types of games is beyond the scope of this paper, it is significant to note that college students *are* playing and that this type of play often takes on specific characteristics that may have some harmful outcomes (Dean & Wenner, 2024).
- ✓ Considering that playful learning has not been a longstanding practice in most primary and secondary schools, few preservice teachers are likely to have strong memories and personal experiences to draw on to guide their playful teaching. Therefore, it is incumbent on teacher preparation programs to use playful learning as a teaching approach and to explicitly teach preservice teachers how to design, incorporate, and facilitate it (Kharod, 2024).
- ✓ Thought leaders, including Jonathan Haidt, maintain the current collegiate mental health crisis is not due to the college environment itself but instead is rooted in students' childhood and adolescent behaviors (Sundstrom, 2024). In his most recent book, *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt maintains that "overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world" are heavy contributors to Gen Z's mental health challenges (Haidt, 2024, p. 9).
- ✓ Academic pressures and budget constraints, alongside the demand for high-performance standards, have pushed educators to the brink of burnout. With a career once characterized by passion and creativity now overshadowed by paperwork and bureaucracy, many educators are walking away from their calling in search of financial stability and job satisfaction in other professions. Amidst these challenges lies an opportunity for transformation. By reimagining the role of play in teaching and educators' lives, we can usher in an era of creativity, playfulness, well-being, and joy that aligns with the core values of early childhood education (Beloglovsky, 2024).
- ✓ Early childhood educators are experiencing an identity crisis. We have worked hard to gain recognition for our work and achieve higher compensation. We are also constantly pushed to join practices that compromise the values we hold close to our hearts—the values of play, joy, creativity, empathy, and compassion (Beloglovsky, 2024).
- ✓ The realm of education is fast-paced and ever-changing, putting immense pressure on educators. They constantly face a barrage of demands that take a toll on their mental and emotional well-being. This pressure cooker of expectations and responsibilities is a significant obstacle to their work-life balance. Adding to this situation, the education system constantly evolves and adapts. The constant need for adjustment and the lack of support can create an overwhelming and stressful environment in the profession. This has significantly increased the stress levels among educators, affecting their overall job satisfaction (Beloglovsky, 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 50<sup>th</sup> 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 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary White Paper, please visit [IPAUSA.org](http://IPAUSA.org). Questions? Email [ipausa2019user@gmail.com](mailto:ipausa2019user@gmail.com). IPA USA is here to support you in your work.