

document. Those issues that impact on play for children with limited resources will be mentioned briefly here to reinforce that play contributes to optimal child development for all children and that we must advocate for the changes specific to the need of each child's social and environmental context that would enhance the opportunities for play.

These guidelines were written in response to the multiple forces that challenge play. The overriding premise is that play (or some available free time in the case of older children and adolescents) is essential to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth. Although the guidelines were written in defense of play, they should not be interpreted as being against other forces that compete for children's time. Academic enrichment opportunities are vital for some children's ability to progress academically, and participation in organized activities is known to promote healthy youth development.^{2,3} It is essential that a wide variety of programming remain available to meet the needs of both children and families. Rather, these guidelines call for an inclusion of play as we seek the balance in children's lives that will create the optimal developmental milieu to prepare our children to be academically, socially, and emotionally equipped to lead us into the future.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development.⁴⁻⁶ It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers.⁷⁻¹⁴ As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges.^{7,10,15} Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills.^{7,10,11,16} When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue.^{7,10,11} Ideally, much of play involves adults, but when play is controlled by adults, children acquiesce to adult rules and concerns and lose some of the benefits play offers them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership, and group skills.¹⁷ In contrast to passive entertainment, play builds active, healthy bodies. In fact, it has been suggested that encouraging unstructured play may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children, which is one important strategy in the resolution of the obesity epidem-

ic.^{18,19} Perhaps above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood.

Children's developmental trajectory is critically mediated by appropriate, affective relationships with loving and consistent caregivers as they relate to children through play.⁴ When parents observe their children in play or join with them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their child's vantage point as the child navigates a world perfectly created just to fit his or her needs. (The word "parent" is used in this report to represent the wide range of adult caregivers who raise children.) The interactions that occur through play tell children that parents are fully paying attention to them and help to build enduring relationships.^{6,13,14,20,21} Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse into their children's world learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle, nurturing guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing their parents an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of their perspective. Quite simply, play offers parents a wonderful opportunity to engage fully with their children.

Play is integral to the academic environment. It ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills.²²⁻³² Social-emotional learning is best integrated with academic learning; it is concerning if some of the forces that enhance children's ability to learn are elevated at the expense of others. Play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social-emotional learning.^{33,34}

REDUCED CHILD-DRIVEN PLAY AND THE POTENTIAL REPERCUSSIONS

Despite the numerous benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for some children. This trend has even affected kindergarten children, who have had free play reduced in their schedules to make room for more academics. A 1989 survey taken by the National Association of Elementary School Principals found that 96% of surveyed school systems had at least 1 recess period. Another survey a decade later found that only 70% of even kindergarten classrooms had a recess period.^{35,36}

Currently, many schoolchildren are given less free time and fewer physical outlets at school; many school districts responded to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001³⁷ by reducing time committed to recess, the creative arts, and even physical education in an effort to focus on reading and mathematics.^{38,39} This change may have implications on children's ability to store new in-