

DECLINE OF PLAY AND RISE OF MENTAL DISORDERS

I. What Is Play?

- Play is nature's way of ensuring that young mammals practice the skills they need to survive & thrive.
- Play and exploration as the means of education in hunter-gatherer and other traditional societies.
- Children everywhere play in *physical* ways, in *risky* ways, with *language*, with *rules*, with *imagination*, with *logic*, at *building things*, with the *tools* of their culture, and, especially, *socially*.
- Play is activity that is (1) self-chosen & self-directed; (2) intrinsically motivated; (3) guided by mental concepts; & (4) imaginative.

II. The Decline of Play

- Historical & social science evidence for huge decline in play over 60 years, especially outdoor play.
- My observations of play's decline, from 1950s to today.
- Some reasons for the decline: Spread of fears; weight of school; schoolish view of child development.

III. Psychological Consequences of the Decline of Play

A. Increased depression, anxiety, and suicides in young people.

- Five- to 8-fold increase in Major Depression and anxiety disorders in young people, estimated from standard clinical questionnaires, from 1950s to early 2000s. Six-fold rise in children's suicide rate.
- Some reasons for linking these effects to the decline in play:
 - (a) A world without play is depressing and anxiety-provoking;
 - (b) play is how children make friends and practice courage.
 - (c) play deprivation experiments with monkeys and rats.

B. Decline in young people's sense of control over their lives.

- Continuous decline in "internal locus of control," based on standard assessments.
- A causal relationship: Decline in play → loss of sense of control → depression and anxiety.
- Declining student resilience: A crisis on college campuses.
- Correlation of amount of free play with "self-directed executive processing" in children.

C. Decline in creativity among US school children at all grade levels

- Since 1984, based on Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking.
- Why the increase in academic training and decline in play would reduce creativity.

IV. How to Restore Children's Play in Today's World

A. At the individual and family level: See Lenore Skenazy's *Free Range Kids*. Examine our own values (what do we really want for our children?). Examine our own fears (how rational are they?). Be brave and let children be brave.

B. At the neighborhood level: See Mike Lanza's *Playborhood*. Create neighborhood play opportunities.

C. In schools: Bring back recesses, but that is not enough. After-school free play at school.

D. At the community level: Initiatives of the Let Grow Foundation. See <https://letgrow.org> Creation of "capable kids communities" and working with schools so they become places for play.

Possible roles of schools; Parks and Recreation; police; child protective services; local pediatricians; etc.

(References on other side)

Some References**Books on the problem of play deprivation and what to do about it**

Peter Gray. *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. Basic Books.

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Mike Lanza. *Playborhood: Turn Your Neighborhood into a Place for Play*. Free Play Press.

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Animal Research on Play Deprivation

Panksepp, J. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, psychostimulants, and intolerance of childhood playfulness: A tragedy in the making? *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 7, 91-98. (1998).

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See also Peter Gray, Freedom to Learn blog: <http://blogs.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn> and <https://letgrow.org> and follow me on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/peter.gray.3572>
