



The Power of Play

Why your kids need to run, jump, and yes, goof off.

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I'm standing on the sweltering blacktop at Wilson Elementary in Richmond. It's recess, and with my guest badge in plain sight, I'm mingling among the students like a giant in a world of giggling monsters. I'm looking for something, some clue to help me understand why Playworks, a national organization devoted to encouraging play in elementary schools, is so effective at stopping bullying. That's when I see a tetherball game come to an abrupt stop. There's some sort of disagreement, a questionable call.

It's a scene that plays out thousands of times each day at schools across the country, and it's the kind of moment that sometimes leads to hurt feelings or even fights.

Which makes what happens next remarkable. After a few seconds stating their cases, and without any prompting or intervention from an adult or peer monitor, the two first-grade boys involved in the dispute face off, raise their hands, and pound out the familiar three count of rock-paper-scissors. The loser grits his teeth and silently walks to the back of the line. The game resumes immediately with a new challenger.

Oakland-based Playworks believes that play, with an emphasis on trying to keep everyone having fun, is crucial to your kids' development.

"The thing about play," explains Jill Viallet, the energetic founder and president of Playworks, "is that it's a springboard for giving kids control. It's a thing we're overlooking at great expense."

Viallet isn't alone in sounding the alarm about the need for more

unstructured play. In low-income neighborhoods, ravaged by drugs and related violent crime, parents are terrified to let their kids outside. But here's the thing: Even kids in upscale neighborhoods, such as Danville, Lamorinda, Pleasanton, and Walnut Creek, aren't getting enough time to play. Instead of violence, it's their parents' good intentions that get in the way.

In Diabloland, the average six-year-old will spend several hours of nonschool time each week in language boot camp, tae kwon do practice, and—groan—oboe lessons. Combine these activities with ever-heavier homework loads, chores, family time, and a national average of 53 hours per week on electronic devices, and many kids just don't have room in their busy lives for a type of recreation that you probably took for granted: playing with

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neighborhood friends, inventing silly games, and running around like a total goof.

That's a big problem. It turns out that unstructured play, which forces kids to navigate complex social hierarchies without intervention from an authority figure, is a fundamental way to learn cooperation, empathy, leadership, and a whole host of skills that Toastmasters for Tots just won't teach them.

To help put play back in kids' lives, Playworks trains young charismatic coaches to orchestrate recess in elementary schools all over the country—in effect, to cultivate and encourage cooperative play.

According to a new study conducted by Stanford University and Mathematica Policy Research, Playworks has developed one of the most effective models out there for stopping bullying in schools. “It just makes sense to me that play would be conducive to a reduction in bullying,” says Vialet, “that it would be conducive to kids feeling safer. It was true for me. If I'm outside, getting to play, the world is a better place.”

So how does Playworks do it, and what can parents take away from the organization's success? A lot of it comes down to what Playworks' coaches are not: teachers. Coaches try to confound the impression that they've come to babysit or discipline students.

“A coach is a young adult who isn’t really supervising so much as being a tour guide or a travel guide to a culture of play,” Violet explains. “They are trained with an eye toward getting kids to be in charge as soon as it’s safe and fun and healthy to do so.”

In other words, Playworks’ coaches model cooperative play, teach kids the rules to playground games, and give them a few tricks to help them deal with conflict themselves, such as rock-paper-scissors. Then, they step back.

When I visited Wilson Elementary in late May to see a Playworks school in action, I met Coach Grace, a 24-year-old AmeriCorps volunteer wearing a Playworks T-shirt, black stretch pants, big shades, and sneakers. She looked cool, decidedly unteacherlike.

When we hit the blacktop at the start of recess, she walked around giving kids high fives and encouragement. She also stepped in and played games of foursquare and tetherball, competing enthusiastically as the munchkins in her care tried to take her down. She repeatedly gave her competitors props for nice plays and close misses. That may not seem like anything special, but everything Coach Grace did was deliberate. By modeling that positive behavior, she was giving the students a clear example to follow.

This was the end of the year, and students at Wilson had come a long way since September. I asked Coach Grace what it was like when she first arrived, and she laughed. “Kids were playing in this one tiny area of the blacktop. This space is huge, but they were all clustered together,” she explained. “Balls were flying around, and kids were getting whacked in the face. No positive language, no encouragement.”

For *Diablo* readers, it’s that last comment—no positive language, no encouragement—that probably strikes the most resonant chord. Structured activities are often competitive—think soccer practice or debate club—and without the counterbalance of unstructured play, every interaction your kids have may begin to feel like a contest. When they have time to play with friends, and when they’ve been shown how to play in a cooperative, empathetic way, the results are astounding. I witnessed dozens of high fives, hugs, and “nice tries” in the 15-minute recess I observed at Wilson.

Most importantly, I saw young students confident in their game-playing and conflict-resolution skills. That reaffirmed what may be the single most important lesson from Playworks’ success: The benefits of unstructured play are enormous, but you need to make sure to free up some time in your kids’ structured lives.

In other words, give them plenty of opportunities to hang out with friends, invent games, and just be goofy. I suggest cutting the oboe lessons, but hey, it’s your kid.

For more information, go to playworks.org. To hear Jill Violet’s Ted Talk on the importance of play, go to playworks.org/media/videos/what-play-can-teach-us. ■