

## Relearning the lost art of child's play

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From Friday's Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Apr. 07, 2011 8:14PM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Apr. 07, 2011 10:14PM EDT



Meandering games of make-believe. Checking under rocks for bugs. Pillow fights. These things come naturally to children, right? Not necessarily. Old-fashioned playtime has become an increasingly quaint activity – children play an estimated eight hours fewer a week than they did a decade ago.

Researchers are spreading the word that everything from kids' physical health to problem-solving skills are at stake, but many parents are wondering how to fit unscripted playtime into schedules already crammed with organized sports, video games and homework. As play can be a hard skill to dust off, they're seeking out websites, advocacy groups and child-development experts to expand their play repertoire.

On a recent chilly day, for instance, Collingwood, Ont., mother Michelle Ward took inspiration from a Web resource, armed herself with food colouring and headed outside to paint the snow green with her two sons.

"It's not something I would have thought of. They had a blast," she recalls.

Last fall, a free New York event drew 50,000 parents and children to Central Park for a remedial lesson in play. The Ultimate Block Party featured everything from games of I Spy to sidewalk chalk drawing.

Since then, more than a dozen cities have organized similar riotous events. Toronto will hold its own Ultimate Block Party this June at Fort York.

"Parents' instincts are that kids need play and love to play," says UBP co-founder Roberta Golinkoff, a developmental psychologist at the University of Delaware. But recent economic uncertainty has only intensified parents' drive to steer their children toward "educational" play. Jumping into mud puddles won't get your kid into a top university, goes the thinking; *Baby Einstein* might help.

"The marketplace has done a great job of scaring parents that they have to spend a whole lot of money on electronics and toys with one right answer," she says. "The best thing about the Ultimate Block Party is that not a single thing was sold."

Parents were given playbooks, featuring familiar games such as Simon Says as well as creative endeavours such as making a cityscape out of cereal boxes.

As Dr. Golinkoff says, all you have to do is get down on the floor with your kid and start talking. Then, let your child assign you a role. “In play, you let the child be the boss and decide what they want to be, what you’re going to be.” Otherwise, she says, if parents are too heavy-handed, “it shuts down the play.”

It’s a lesson that educators are grappling with, as they adopt “play-based learning” over traditional “drill-and-kill” methods. Toronto’s Ultimate Block Party is being organized with the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, in part to get the message out that play is a better way to prepare kids to learn.

Studies also show that self-regulation – the new darling of child development – also stems from wide-ranging play. Research has traced higher literacy scores to children in schools with playgrounds over children without. In other words, a child who takes risks at recess is more likely to try to read a challenging book.

“The word play has this aspect of frivolity around it,” says Stuart Shanker, a child development expert at York University. “There’s still a tendency for parents that this is ‘just’ play. It’s not.”

What’s more, “The child doesn’t know when it’s play or when it’s not play,” says Dr. Golinkoff.

For parents who have fond memories of roughhousing, an illustrated primer is on its way. *The Art of Roughhousing: Good Old-Fashioned Horseplay and Why Every Kid Needs It* is being published next month.

In it, Ann Arbor, Mich., physician Anthony DeBenedet and Boston psychologist Lawrence Cohen make a call for a return to rambunctious physical play in our safety-obsessed culture.

While many parents may roll their eyes at the book’s remedial lessons in playing airplane or staging a pillow fight, Dr. Cohen says others do need to start with the basics. In a recent workshop he staged, it was the first time one mother and daughter duo wore pants instead of skirts – let alone the first time they horsed around physically.

“They had the greatest time,” says Dr. Cohen. “In the end, the mother said, ‘We never do this because I always think there’s something more worthwhile we should be doing. And now I realize that’s not true.’”

Their tips include starting slow and not swooping in and surprising your child with rough play. Pratfalls are golden, too.

“You have to be willing to lose your dignity,” says Dr. Cohen. “One of my favourites is having a child touch you and you fall over in a Shakespearean death scene. Then you get up and do it again until it’s not funny any more.”

While they admit to getting the odd bruise, they do urge parents to play safe. “If your child seems too young to ride a mattress down a staircase, give her some time to grow,” reads one note in the book’s introduction.

The use of a female pronoun is deliberate, says Dr. DeBenedet, a father of three girls. While roughhousing has been the domain of boys, he says it’s crucial for girls as a way of countering a world that increasingly casts them as sex objects.

“With girls, especially pre-teen girls, they need to get a clearer message that there are other ways to be in the world besides sexual.”

Other play advocates place a premium on heading outside and letting kids get muddy.

Kristen Maxwell co-ordinates an outdoor play group in a park in Burlington, Ont., that meets in all but the most severe weather conditions. She says she’s seen the difference the play has made for her five-year-old daughter.

“She’s a typical little girl, a little bit of a princess, and outdoor play group has taught her how to get dirty and play in mud puddles and have a really good time.”

She says many parents admit it’s a challenge to get outside in the face of milestone-chasing in areas such as swimming, reading and other pursuits.

“A lot of families feel pressure to try and meet those goals rather than the simplicity of ‘Go play outside and make a mud puddle.’”

Indeed, many experts say that the last thing they want to do is replicate those pressures on the play front.

“We don’t want to create stress,” says Dr. Shanker. “The reality is if you’re busy and you get home late at night, it’s hard. But it’s good for you and it’s good for them.”

Or, as Dr. Golinkoff puts it, don’t forget that “the best toy a child can have is a parent.”

## **HOME GAMES**

### **Adventure Play**

- Draw and colour a map of your bedroom. Where are all of your things?
- Make a treasure hunt! Find things around the house - a book, a pencil, an apple.

### **Construction Play**

- Construct a “cereal box” city. How many different style of building can you build.? How high can they go?

- Lay a toy on the floor and figure out a way to build a bridge over the toy with blocks.

### Physical Play

- Create a Simon Says game at home. Take turns being Simon!
- Ask your parents to teach you games they played when they were kids.

### Creative Play

- Create a telescope out of paper towel and toilet paper rolls.
- Make a face out of outdoor materials like logs, nuts and leaves - make the face sad, happy, silly!

### Music and Dance Play

- Anything can be a drum. Turn over a plastic bucket and start to bang out a rhythm.
- Mirror-dancing: get a partner and take turns following everything your partner does.

### Make-Believe Play

- Make-believe you are a wild animal. What animal are you? How do you sound?
- Pretend you are making the most delicious soup. What's in it?

### Technology Play

- With help from an adult, pick a few small items in your kitchen like a spoon, a measuring cup, a straw and a toothpick. Have your parent fill a bowl of water. Which object will float? Why do you think so? Now, test your hypothesis!

### Language Play

- Create an ABC book on a favourite subject. For example: My hometown, family, pets, plants and trees in my city, or favourite characters from books you've read together.
- Put on a show! Make up a story and perform it. Create your own actions and words to tell the story.
- from the Ultimate Block Party Playbook. [www.ultimateblockparty.org](http://www.ultimateblockparty.org).