



Play as a Fundamental Human Right for Children

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As early as the 1970's, experts were expressing concerns about academic skills taking over the preschool curriculum in the United States. Preschool aged children have [steadily lost unstructured, playful learning time](#) to structured activities meant to promote academic learning. Despite the intention to better prepare children for school and equip them with needed skills, this shift has had far-reaching consequences on children's social, emotional, and developmental needs.

Innumerable amounts of books, research articles, and organizations in education, child development, and medicine support the value and importance of play. For example, in 2018, an updated [clinical report](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that pediatricians advocate for the importance of play, and that they prescribe play especially in the first two years of life, specifically noting its benefits in brain development, learning, pro social behaviors, coping, and resilience. Noting the critical importance of play for young children, social workers should use their reach and experience to encourage families, teachers, and schools to promote play for children.

The Benefits of Play for Children

[Numerous studies](#) have demonstrated the enormous benefit of play for young children. Due to the lack of structure or academic focus, it has been assumed to distract or waste the time or attention of children. Yet the unstructured, spontaneous nature of play is precisely what fuels growth and skill development for kids. Children who are engrossed in play have been shown to take part in skills around problem solving, creativity, and collaboration. Play also helps children learn social-emotional skills and have better relationships with their peers and parents. They can experiment and take risks, and play gives them a sense of agency they would otherwise lack. These are all skills essential to becoming a successful adult.

Yet, children in the United States continue to be engaged in academic activities at young ages, and the problem is becoming more urgent. Children are struggling with obesity and mental health issues at increasingly higher rates. Anxiety, depression, and suicidality in children and adolescents are on the rise, and the COVID pandemic has exacerbated preexisting racial and ethnic disparities in access to mental health services. Early childhood education administrators prioritize academic achievement of children over play, and parents engage even younger children in academics before they enter preschool, and yet research suggests early academic interventions have little to no impact on later academic achievement, and in some cases a focus on academics actually worsens long term academic outcomes. All the while, children are losing out on the opportunity to engage in playful activities that would promote whole-child development.

How Social Workers can Advocate for Play

The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics speaks to our need for cultural competence with regard to age, mental and physical ability, and reminds us that we must take steps to safeguard the rights and interests of those that lack decision making capacity. We are mandated to promote the general welfare of society and to advocate for living conditions that support the fulfillment of basic human needs, and to promote policies that safeguard the rights of all people. We must act to prevent domination or discrimination. Advocating for children's right to play is an ethical issue for social workers and this post-COVID period of prioritizing mental health and wellbeing is the right time for social workers to engage.

Children's access to play has been referred to as a social justice and equity issue, yet we as a country are failing to protect children's fundamental human right to play. Social workers are in a unique position to act to protect and encourage the right to play for children, and should take positive steps forward to promote the importance of play to children's health and wellness. Beyond our classroom discussions about Piaget's proposition that children are not just mini adults, we need to talk and teach about play as a valuable, developmentally appropriate, necessary behavior that social workers must prioritize in their practice, teaching, research, and advocacy.

What can you as a social worker do to support and advocate for play? Take some time to learn more about the science and research that supports play so that you can confidently share this important information with your loved ones, clients, colleagues, and others. Make time for play in your personal life, especially for the children you care about. Prioritizing play time will send a message to everyone that you value and are willing to invest time in play.

Critically, you can then advocate for play in your spheres of influence: Attend school board meetings and advocate for recess and other unstructured play time in public schools, support and develop programs that promote and protect children's play, and encourage play in your clients' lives by engaging them in play and encouraging them to protect and support play in their homes. Social workers have the opportunity to help support children's mental and physical health, as well as their long-term wellbeing, by advocating for this simple but overlooked necessity.