

TRUCE Family Play Plans: Encouraging Families to Play Together in the Media Age

by Blakely Bundy and Diane E. Levin

“Children’s play today is much less creative and much more scripted, based on TV shows and movies,” reports Kathy Hardy, the director of Winnetka (IL) Community Nursery School, who has been in the early childhood field for over 30 years. “Another thing I’ve seen change over the years is children’s abilities and interest in art. I think that is because so few are experimenting at home with blank paper and crayons at the kitchen table while Mom cooks dinner.”

A teacher in Atlanta reports seeing a family with three children, including a preschooler and two elementary-age kids, all glued to individual screen devices as they eat their dinner at a restaurant — never once talking to or looking at one another.

At parent-teacher conferences, teachers report asking parents what they do together as a family at home. Do they ever play together? *Play together?* A common response is, “Well, we take them places, like to restaurants and movies, they play on my iPhone, and we watch TV together or read books, if that’s what you mean.”

Play Deficit Disorder?

TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children’s Entertainment) hears from many teachers across the country reporting stories like these. They also say many children do not know how to engage in creative play. Children often do not seem very interested in or quickly become bored with developmentally appropriate play materials such as blocks, play dough, generic dress-up clothes, baby dolls, and paints. Unable to come up with play scenarios based on their own ideas, imaginations, and experiences, they frequently become frustrated. Some complain that they are bored or ask to play with a screen-based device. And children even have disagreements about the details of the shows or movies that they have seen and are trying to recreate in their play,

such as who can be which character or what the character is supposed to do. These conflicts often result in the play ending before children ever have a chance to become fully engaged in it.

Here is one teacher’s description of the changes she has observed over several years:

“It’s harder and harder to have free play in my classroom. Some children roam around the room dabbling with this or that, rarely getting involved in any activity for long. When they do, it often quickly dissolves into a conflict. I’ve stopped putting out some of the more traditional play materials, like play dough. Children don’t do much with it; they just poke at it and then go on to something else. It’s often easier to plan structured activities that I lead. Most of the kids do what I tell them to do; I worry about what they aren’t learning when I do that.” (Levin, 2013)

We know that what and how children play can impact the nature and quality of their learning. When their play is inspired by their own ideas, experiences, and imaginations — when they find their own interesting problems to work on and solve in their play — it helps lay the vital intellectual



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foundation they need for more formal, academic learning later on. It also promotes their social and emotional development and well being (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015; Gray, 2013; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Linn, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). The play challenges that many children seem to be displaying in school today, as described by the teachers above, makes it sound like many children are arriving at school with “play deficit disorder” (PDD) — problems getting involved in creative play, or more specifically, *problem solving deficit disorder* —PSDD — the inability to become engaged in meaningful problem solving in their play (Levin, 2013).

Despite these concerns about play voiced by many teachers, we do not hear a lot of discussion about why children might be arriving at school with PDD. We also hear little about what schools can do to help children learn how to become engaged in quality play and why it is so important that they do so. Instead, many schools have dealt with the problem by reducing ‘free play’ time and providing more structured activities like worksheets, teacher-directed lessons, and Common Core State Standards-related activities (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin & Almon, 2015).

What Is Going On?

Why are children arriving at school with fewer play skills than in the past? What has changed in what happens before children ever get to school — with how children spend their time and what they do at home — that is contributing to children coming to school with fewer play skills than in the past?

Probably most central is the fact that many children are spending less time at home engaged in creative, child-generated play, with concrete, hands-on materials. Instead, they spend more and more time with screens at younger and younger ages that may provide fun and excitement, but involve them in a two-dimensional world, following someone else’s agenda or program (Levin, 2013). In such a situation, children have less opportunity to engage in activities of their own making or experience the satisfaction that comes from seeing where such activities can lead. Instead, they increasingly need someone else to tell them what to do, if not the program, then the worksheet or the teacher — or a highly structured, single

purpose toy, like many of those that are replicas of characters children see on screens.

Next, many parents find that they need to put their children in front of screens more and more as they themselves are experiencing additional pressures to meet their family’s needs — economically, socially, and emotionally. Pressures such as longer work hours, increasing financial demands, social isolation, and single-parent families all can make it harder for parents to have the time and energy required to encourage and support their children’s play.

Having less time and opportunity for child-directed play at home is undoubtedly also impacted by the fact that, in more affluent homes, even very young children may be signed up for a myriad of classes and ‘enrichment opportunities,’ from ballet to karate, soccer to violin — which often promise to give children early advantages to succeed in the world. These activities have adults telling children what to do to learn whatever skill is being taught. As children are shuttled back and forth to these activities, it leaves less time for child-directed free play (Bundy & Hardy, 2011).

Finally, parents themselves may not have engaged in productive play when they were children and, therefore, find it more difficult to encourage their own children to play or to play with them than parents in the past. When the Reagan Administration deregulated marketing to children directly through children’s television programs in 1984, many children’s shows became ‘program-length’ commercials (Levin, 2013). Toy makers developed highly-structured, media-linked toys, which soon became more popular than

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open-ended, classic children's toys like blocks, dolls, dress-ups, cars and trucks, doll houses, and so on. Many of today's parents were undoubtedly impacted by these events in their own play when they were young, and therefore, may have suffered themselves from Play Deficit Disorder as children and are not equipped to value or promote play in the home.

What Can We Do?

Given what we know about the importance of play as a foundation for success in later academic learning and the changing nature of how children spend their time at home, how can we help families reclaim play as a vital part of family life? Without putting more pressure on families, what can we do to help parents take a more active role in engaging their young children — even their whole family — in meaningful, creative play activities?

Our organization, TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (www.TRUCEteachers.org)) set out to try to answer these questions. TRUCE is a national grassroots organization of early childhood educators who are deeply concerned about how children's entertainment and toys are affecting the play and behavior of young children. Founded 20 years ago, TRUCE has provided easily available resources that help parents and teachers of young children: 1) deal effectively with the media and technology in young children's lives; and, 2) understand how to select appropriate toys and promote quality play activities at home and at school. Given TRUCE'S mission and the concerns we were hearing from teachers about play, TRUCE began asking what resources in the home could help parents deal with PDD.

TRUCE Family Play Plans

Realizing that families need not only encouragement, but also user-friendly ideas for family play at home, TRUCE created *Summer-Fall-Winter-Spring Family Play Plans*. These plans use everyday, inexpensive (or free) materials such as bubbles, cardboard boxes, string, leaves, water, and chalk as themes for family play — play theme materials highlighted for each season. The Play Plans are designed to be inclusive of most families. They are low cost and can be enjoyed by adults and

Presenting TRUCE Family Play Plans to Families at Your School

Listed are some suggestions for how to introduce the Family Play Plans to the families at your school and to encourage families to take the time to use them as an inspiration for family play:

Go to the TRUCE website (www.TRUCEteachers.org). Use the one-page flyer describing the 12 Family Play Plans to introduce parents — either a hard copy sent home or a link contained in a newsletter — to the Play Plans and to encourage families to try them out.

Alternatively, send one Play Plan home each month (there are a total of 12 Play Plans) — again, either as a hard copy or a link — encouraging families to try one family play theme each month.

Use one of the Play Plan ideas with children in the classroom and then send home the Play Plan with that material and a suggestion about how the child's family can extend the play, using the ideas in the Play Plan. For example, the children could make a sock puppet at school. Then you could send home the sock puppet, along with the Winter Family Play Plan for Socks.

Ask a couple of families in your school to try out ideas from one of the Play Plans and to document their experiences with photos and a testimonial (i.e., write a short description to go with the photos). Then publish their story in your newsletter, whether hard copy or online.

Invite a speaker to talk to parents about the importance of play in children's healthy growth and development. Then introduce the Play Plans as a way for parents to use what they learned and to encourage play at home.

At the beginning of each season, highlight the Family Play Plans that are available for that season as a way to keep parents aware of easy-to-do play ideas throughout the year.

For either a Parents' Night or a Family Night at your school, introduce several of the activities described in the Play Plans. Then suggest that families take home copies of the Play Plans (or give them the link to the TRUCE website). For example, areas could be set up for making and playing with play dough, creating string dolls and box villages, and trying some water play. Provide copies of the corresponding Play Plans. Once parents have gotten a taste of how easy it is to provide these activities and how much fun they can be, hopefully they will feel comfortable and be inspired to continue the play at home.

children of different ages — i.e., the whole family — playing together:

The Bubbles Family Play Plan includes a recipe for bubbles; games to play with bubbles, such as a bubble relay or bubble tag; science experiments using bubbles; and bubble art.

The Chalk Family Play Plan includes ideas for chalk art, such as ‘painting’ with chalk; games with chalk, such as hopscotch and tic-tac-toe; and chalk projects, such as drawing a chalk road on the sidewalk for toy cars and trucks.

The Cardboard Boxes Family Play Plan suggests ideas for cardboard boxes, such as creating a box city, a robot, or a train.

Each Family Play Plan suggests ideas for open-ended activities that can be expanded and grow based on family members’ interests. There is no one right way to do them.

To help parents learn more about how to connect meaningfully with their children as they play, every Family Play Plan also contains suggestions for parents observing their children as they play and for asking children simple questions, such as “What is the wind doing to the bubbles?” or “How can we make a pattern with our chalk?” To help parents appreciate the value of their family play, each Family Play Plan also includes a quote from a child development expert in “What Do the Experts Say?” For example, on the Cardboard Box Play Plan, there is a quote from the National Toy Hall of Fame that states,

“With nothing more than a little imagination, boxes can be transformed into forts or houses, spaceships or submarines, castles or caves. Inside a big cardboard box, a child is transported to a world of his or her own, one where anything is possible.”

Finally, each Play Plan provides a “TRUCE Family Play Tip,” suggesting that they develop a family ‘screen turn-off’ ritual to do before they begin their Family Play Plan activity. This can help them become more aware of how their use of screens can interfere with quality family play time.

The 12 two-page Play Plans are available on the TRUCE website (www.TRUCEteachers.org) in both color and black and white versions. They are free of charge and can be downloaded, reprinted, and shared easily, without special permission.

Conclusion

We know that play is essential to children’s healthy social, emotional, and cognitive growth. Yet today, we hear teachers reporting that more and more children are arriving at school with PDD. There are many factors at work — in homes, schools, and the wider society — that are contributing to this problem. It is of vital importance that we begin giving more attention to this issue and explore what we can do to make it better.

Here, we offer one parent- and school-friendly way to encourage play in the home, hoping to inspire fun and togetherness, not guilt or stress — for anyone. We hope that, as dedicated early childhood educators, you will find ways that TRUCE’s Family Play Plans can help you encourage the families in your school to play together at home. And, as a result, you are able to promote the quality of play among the children in your program.

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