

We must stop stealing childhood in the name of education

Returning play to its rightful place

In short, there is no evidence that pressuring children to read at five improves their later reading, and much concern that it is damaging. There is now a call for more rigorous education for young children. This implies additional hours of didactic instruction and testing. What we really need is a more vigorous education that meets young children's needs and prepares them for the 21st century, which is often described as a century of imagination and creativity. The children are ready. Are we?" — Joan Almon (Co-founder, Alliance for Childhood), Reading at five: Why?

My work gives me the privilege to travel widely and connect with thousands of children, parents and educators. In recent years, I have found more and more people telling me of children who are struggling. They are struggling with anxiety, serious behavioural concerns, mental health issues (including depression in children as young as four), aggressive or violent behaviour, frustration and anger (particularly after school), exhaustion and stress.

Our children struggle to have a childhood with freedom, with moments of joy and delight, in the company of passionate experienced educators. Quite frankly, it is heartbreaking.

In Australia, our previous government's 'education revolution' saw the introduction of standardised tests, benchmarking and rankings, as well as a national curriculum that is at odds with the very sound, play-based Early Years' Learning Framework. I read that in NZ there has been similar controversy with ranking children according to their 'national standards rating' and schools grappling with an online progress and consistency tool (PaCT), designed to help teachers be accountable in knowing whether their students are meeting yearly educational targets.

"Early childhood educators cultivate the most precious resource. We build assets and empower individuals."
Dr Alice Brown

The result, in Australia at least, is that there has been a 'push-down' of formalised learning into the early years and while decision makers might think they are doing what is best to improve the educational outcomes of children, they are sadly misguided.

According to the Australian Early Development Index, 23.7% of Australian children are turning up to year one with a significant developmental delay. Almost 20 years ago that statistic was 5 to 10%. Boys and our Indigenous children feature very highly in this 25% and the current push down to have four-year-olds doing hours of formal learning at a desk, then having homework on top, and endlessly filling in black line workbooks, will create even more children who are going to struggle their entire school life.

Even the latest COAG Reform Council report on education, released in October 2013, shows the gap for Indigenous children and disadvantaged children is growing ever wider under the new system, despite some improvements in 'outcomes' overall.

Australia comes fifth in the latest OECD ranking of basic literacy, but 13th in a ranking for basic numeracy, with UK 19th and US 20th. The UK and US have been doing benchmark testing vigorously for more years than Australia. We have only been doing it for 6 years – will Australia drop to the same levels as the UK and US? The top-ranked country, Finland where formal learning starts at 7 and there is no benchmark testing,

ensures a strong play based early years emphasis until ALL children are 7. Their approach leads the world on the OECD scales.

Play is learning and critical to early years

As teachers, we need to ensure children are not seen as brains on a seat to become test monkeys to serve politicians or educational bureaucrats. Our children, especially our young children, are developing on all levels in their early years. The emotional, social, psychological, physical and cognitive development are all impeded negatively for the vast majority of children by this push down in the early years.

Cambridge University researcher David Whitebread, who is one of the signatories of the UK campaign "Too much Too soon" against early formalised learning in the UK, writes about the value and importance of play in young children's development, especially the value of extended periods of playful learning before the start of formal schooling:

"Powerful evidence supporting this view of the role of play in human functioning has also emerged within recent developmental psychology. Here, recent studies using a range of new research techniques, including neuroscientific and other physiological measures, have shown strong and consistent relationships between children's playfulness and their cognitive and emotional ►

MAGGIE DENT



development ... We also now have extensive evidence of the inter-relationships between the complexity and sophistication of children's play, particularly their symbolic or pretend play, and their emotional well-being (sometimes assessed through physiological measures of stress)".

Whitebread's latest report documents the damage that lack of play has on young children:

"Perhaps most worrying, a number of studies have documented the loss of play opportunities to children over the second half of the 20th century and demonstrated a clear link with increased indicators of stress and mental health problems," he writes.

Many allied health professionals are expressing deep concerns about the negative effects of children being made to sit at desks for long periods, made to learn to write before they are ready and who struggle with deep boredom and confusion. I have had messages from the mothers of sons who were told to get their boys assessed because their teacher thought there was something 'wrong'. Not only did they need to spend a lot of money and time on assessments because the government-funded professionals are over booked (some up to two years) they were asked why they were wasting the health professionals' time. Their boys were 'normal'.

The removal of play, movement and fun-based, engaging activities is creating havoc for kinaesthetic learners, mainly boys and Indigenous children. The numbers of 5-6-year-old boys being suspended for inappropriate behaviour is skyrocketing and we need to be concerned. We are setting these children up to fail and hate school forever.

Not only that, research has linked low dopamine levels with ADHD. So what we are doing by removing the key dopamine makers of massive engagement, fun, physical activity and opportunities for early autonomy?

The stress young children experience with passive, often developmentally inappropriate, tasks forced on them has longer-term and disturbing impacts. Parents tell me of children struggling with stress, anxiety, night terrors and a return to repressed behaviours of 2-year-olds – bedwetting, temper tantrums and irrational meltdowns after school.

Psychologist and research professor at Boston College, Peter Gray writes:

"Over the same decades that children's play has been declining, childhood mental disorders have been increasing. Clinical questionnaires aimed at assessing anxiety and depression for example, have been given in unchanged form to normative groups of schoolchildren in the US ever since the 1950s. Analyses of the results reveal a continuous, essentially linear, increase in anxiety and depression in young people over the decades, such that the rates of what today would be diagnosed as generalised anxiety disorder and major depression are five to eight times what they were in the 1950s. Over the same period, the suicide rate for young people aged 15 to 24 has more than doubled, and that for children under age 15 has quadrupled."

The stealing and demonising of play for children aged 4 to 6 is having a disastrous effect on their emotional and social wellbeing. Essentially play and other important child-friendly activities are being pushed out of early years' curriculum and programming because, as US-based Alfie Kohn writes in *Standardized Testing and Its Victims* (2000):

"The time, energy and money being devoted to preparing students for standardised tests have to come from somewhere. Schools across the country are cutting back or eliminating programmes in the arts, recess for young children ... the use of literature in the early grades, entire subject areas such as science."

Unstructured, child-centred play has enormous benefits for young children and those benefits cannot be tested by benchmark testing. Our capacity to be creative thinkers and innovative problem-solvers comes from using our own mental processing to explore the world.

How much do we need to value creative thinking given the speed of change sweeping our modern world? There are no answers in textbooks of how to manage unexpected change and this is why we are disabling our children by stealing their capacity to use play to learn, to explore, to question and to solve problems without an adult's assistance. They are biologically wired to learn from their experiences provided they are engaging and interesting.

According to Whitebread: "In my own area of experimental and developmental psychology, studies have also consistently demonstrated the superior learning and motivation arising from playful, as opposed to instructional, approaches to learning in children. Pretence play supports children's early development of symbolic representational skills, including those of literacy, more powerfully than direct instruction".

Play builds capacity and assists brain integration that allows children to develop auditory processing, listening, self-regulation, concentration and all of these are needed BEFORE we launch into sight words and phoneme awareness. Some children are ready to learn to read well before others – and they can still be encouraged and engaged with play. This is what highly qualified and experienced early years teachers are trained to do.

Play between children develops parts of their brains that no formalised teaching will.

As Hara Estroff Marano highlighted in her book, *A Nation of Wimps*, "play fosters maturation of the very centres of the brain that allows kids to exert control over attention, emotions and to control behaviour. This is a very subtle trick that nature plays – it uses something that is NOT goal-directed to create the mental machinery for BEING goal-directed".

What is confusing is that we have examples of best practice for kindy/prep classes that refuse to use structured learning, black line markers, phonics in isolation and homework and yet they still turn out 'stand-out' students into our primary schools.

"Early childhood educators cultivate the most precious resource. We build assets and empower individuals. The positive experiences we plan and support children with provide a powerful trajectory for a child's future development, values and behaviours", writes Dr Alice Brown, an early childhood and teacher education lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland.

We must return play to its rightful place in our early years' classes for 4-6-year-olds. Every teacher has the opportunity to implement play-based reform in their own way, to reframe standardised testing for students and parents, and to hold fast to their own beliefs about educating the whole child not the brain on the seat. 