



### **Journal of Pediatrics**

#### **Decline in Independent Activity as a Cause of Decline in Children's Mental Well-being**

Our thesis is that a primary cause of the rise in mental disorders is a decline over decades in opportunities for children and teens to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults. Such independent activities may promote mental well-being through both immediate effects, as a direct source of satisfaction, and long-term effects, by building mental characteristics that provide a foundation for dealing effectively with the stresses of life. Those of us old enough to have been children in the 1970s or earlier know from experience that children then had far more freedom to roam, play, and engage in various activities independently of adults than do children today. Over the same decades that children's opportunities for independent activity have declined greatly, so has children's mental health.

A major category of independent activity, especially for young children, is play. Research, as well as everyday observation, indicates that play is a direct source of children's happiness. Reviews, including one that is part of an official statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics, have summarized evidence for the value of play in promoting children's mental well-being.

Similarly, a recent review of research on the effects of adding more recess time in elementary schools revealed consistent findings of improved social and emotional well-being with no loss and sometimes gain in academic performance. Less well-known and discussed, however, is evidence that children's play-like activity appears to be most satisfying and to fit most closely with children's own concept of play when it occurs away from adult oversight and intervention. Observational studies in natural settings have likewise documented an inhibiting effect of the presence of adults on children's play.

The main findings were that those who could play freely in neighborhoods spent, on average, twice as much time outdoors, were much more active while outdoors, had more than twice as many friends, and had better motor and social skills than those deprived of such play.

Beyond promoting immediate mental well-being, children's independent activity also may help build mental capacities and attitudes that foster future well-being. One way of thinking about this involves the concept of internal vs external locus of control (LOC). Internal LOC refers to a person's tendency to believe they have control over their life and can solve problems as they arise, in contrast to external LOC, which is a tendency to believe their experiences are ruled by circumstances beyond their control.

It also seems likely that play and other independent activities, where young people must make their own decisions and solve their own problems, would promote the development of a strong internal LOC. If children have little experience taking control of their own lives, they are unlikely to develop a strong sense that they can exert such control. And so, we have a cause–effect sequence that plausibly contributes to the relationship between children’s independent activity and their mental well-being: Experiences of having control/internal LOC /mental well-being.

Studies with adults involving retrospections about their childhood experiences provide another avenue of support for the idea that early independent activity promotes later well-being. In one such study, those who reported much free and adventurous play in their elementary school years were assessed as having more social success, greater self-esteem, and better overall psychological and physical health in adulthood than those who reported less such play.

Much research within Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has focused on the psychological foundations that enable self-determination, which posits that a prerequisite for a healthy sense of self-determination and, hence, for mental well-being, is the fulfillment of 3 basic psychological needs: those for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To feel in charge of one’s life, one must feel free to choose one’s own paths (autonomy); feel sufficiently skilled to pursue those paths (competence); and have friends and colleagues for support, including emotional support (relatedness).

Research with children has supported the view that the influence of autonomy-supportive parenting on mental well-being is mediated by increases in self-perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Again, this is consistent with what we would expect logically. Play and other self-directed activities are, by definition, autonomous; such activities build skills in endeavors that the children care about, so they promote competence; and such activities are a primary means by which children make friends, so they support relatedness.

Much recent discussion of young people’s mental health has focused on the role of increased use of digital technologies, especially involvement with social media. However, systematic reviews of research into this have provided little support for the contention that either total screen time or time involved with social media is a major cause of, or even correlate of, declining mental health. The association between digital technology use, or social media use in particular, and psychological well-being is, on average, negative but very small.

All in all, the evidence convinces us that the decline in children’s independent activity and, hence, in mental well-being is a national and international health crisis and should be treated as such. Unlike other crises, such as the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic, it has crept up on us gradually, over decades, so many have barely noticed it. Parents today are regularly subject to messages about the dangers that might befall unsupervised children and the value of high achievement in school. However, they hear little of the countervailing messages that if children are to grow up well-adjusted, they need ever-increasing opportunities for independent activity, including self-directed play and meaningful contributions to family and community life, which are signs that they are trusted, responsible, and capable. They need to feel they can deal effectively with the real world, not just the world of school.