

Kids need time to play, do nothing and just be kids

Jay Hamburg

Sentinel Staff Writer

February 4, 2009

Beth Anne Cuda wasn't sure whether she should be proud or worried that her 13-year-old daughter, Kacey, was phoning and texting her classmates to set up appointments to work on their group homework project.

She was glad to see her daughter step up and take responsibility, but she wondered whether she had been teaching her child a bit too much about organization and not enough about free play.

Cuda, who is secretary of the Audubon Park Elementary PTA in Orlando, began to ask herself, "Is there time to just be?"

It's a question mothers all around the world now are asking about their children, according to a new study by Yale University researchers that was recently published in the American Journal of Play.

Among the study's key findings: "Mothers from practically all countries [say] that childhood as they know it is over."

All that striving to achieve in academics, sports and other structured activities has left youngsters little time to be children.

"Parents were pleading that their kids need more free time, but they didn't know how to find it," said Jerome Singer, professor emeritus of psychology at Yale.

Singer said although too much free time might amount to loafing, children learn important skills while entertaining themselves with hide-and-seek, cops-and-robbers and games made up on the spot on playgrounds around the world.

Learning from play

"We know that when children play, they learn to play roles, to communicate, to understand other people and to feel like they belong," Singer said. "Parents kept saying their kids weren't having any fun and they weren't playing like they [the parents] used to."

Educators in countries such as Finland think that free play is so vital to development that they require unstructured play periods for youngsters at school.

But when children do find free time away from structured activities, the most common activity reported in the 16 countries in the study was watching TV at home.

That's because the kids didn't know what to do with unscheduled time and the parents were too worried about safety to let them just roam the neighborhood, Singer said.

Balancing safety

While there were similarities among mothers' attitudes toward their children's play time, there were also some marked differences. Mothers in developing countries more frequently cited safety as a concern compared with mothers in developed countries.

How to balance safety with creative free play is a recurring question for parents such as Debbie Cunningham, who is the mother of a 10-year-old boy and active in the PTA at Princeton Elementary in Orlando.

"When I was young we would take off on our bikes and go all over the neighborhood, or ride to the shopping center, or catch a game of kick ball in the field, or check out the fort in the woods, or catch tadpoles in the ditch," Cunningham wrote in an e-mail response. "In these changing times . . . we fear for the safety of our kids and keep them much closer."

Cunningham said she and her husband, Montje, plan bike rides with their son and try to encourage backyard games of football and baseball.

"Kids' free time today is not and will never be what it was when we were kids," Cunningham said.

Singer hopes that parents will remember what they loved about their own childhood playtime and try to promote similar activities for their children -- within reason.

Although he recalls playing stickball on the streets of New York City as a kid, he realizes that would be insane today. However, parents still can stimulate a kid's sense of fun with a minimal amount of equipment and supervision.

Spontaneous play can make children happier and more confident.

Said Singer, "Playing pretend and make-believe games influences the ability to be creative and learn in everyday life."

Sometimes Cuda just tells her children what parents have been saying for generations: "You have to go outside and do something."

Jay Hamburg can be reached at jhamburg@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5673.