Children's Lack of Playtime Seen As Troubling Health, School Issue
By Linda Jacobson
New York

Teachers and parents are frequently warned that students in the United States are lacking the academic skills they need for the 21st century.

But a growing contingent of educators, psychologists, and other professionals are voicing worries that today’s children are also growing up without the chance to play.

Test preparation in kindergarten, homework requirements, busy out of-school schedules, and reduced recess periods are leaving young children without time to engage in what author and early-childhood expert Vivian Gussin Paley calls “the theater of the young”—that make-believe world in which children act out stories.

“It is this natural outpouring of ideas that receives the least attention from those planning curriculum in our nation’s schools,” she told roughly 900 early-childhood educators gathered here at the 92nd Street Y, a cultural and community center known for having a sought after nursery school program.

In her storytelling style, Ms. Paley recalled a boy involved in make-believe play, wearing a Superman cape, who she visited once at a Head Start program in Milwaukee.

“There is a conspiracy to remove much of his playtime,” she said.

Support Giving
But the meeting here last month—in which cheers even went up for dodgeball, a playground pastime now removed from many schools—was just one in a series of efforts aimed at reclaiming opportunities for children to have unstructured free time. ("Dodge Ball Takes a Drubbing In Several School Districts," Feb. 21, 2001.)

Two years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report saying that play is essential for children’s healthy development.

“Because every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their unique potential,” the report said, “child advocates must consider all factors that interfere with optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play.”

Then last year, the Alliance for Childhood, a College Park, Md.-based advocacy group with affiliates in Europe and South America, published an opinion article in a London newspaper saying that the erosion of play, especially outdoor, “loosely supervised play,” is contributing to mental-health problems in young children. Formal learning activities, the alliance added, are replacing the time that children have to play with friends. ("Children’s Playtime Seen as Significant Mental-Health Issue," Sept. 26, 2007.)

The statement was signed by such leading U.S. child-development figures as David Elkind, the author of The Hurried Child, and Lawrence Schweinhart, the president of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, Mich.

And next summer, when the Washington-based National Association for the Education of Young
Children holds its annual professional-development institute in Charlotte, N.C., its agenda will focus on the topic of play and its link to learning. Not too many years ago, standards and accountability in early childhood were the themes of that conference.

“You’re the sign of hope,” Ms. Paley told the teachers at the Y and the others from more than 20 states and six countries who watched the sessions by satellite telecast. “It is the teachers themselves and the parents who are understanding and recognizing the pendulum has gone too far,” she said.

Others are working to document just how much time young children actually have at school for free time, whether on the playground or in the dramatic-play area.

While it’s long been thought that play and free time have been diminishing in kindergarten classrooms as a result of academic expectations, quantitative evidence has been lacking. But before the end of the year, the Alliance for Childhood is expected to release the results of a study involving researchers from Long Island University in New York and the University of California, Los Angeles, providing a look at the amount of time children have for play in public school kindergarten classrooms in New York City and Los Angeles.

The study is expected to show that play “now appears to be a minor activity in most kindergartens,” said Edward Miller, a program director at the alliance.

“We think the results are quite interesting and significant,” he said. “Play is disappearing from kindergarten classrooms.”

**Research Interest**

Still, he added, because there isn’t a body of research on the topic, the results can’t be compared with past studies. But he hopes other researchers will begin focusing on the issue.

In addition, the project includes a descriptive look at play by researchers at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y. Their observations of 15 classrooms will show a wide variety in what educators mean by “play,” he said.

“Most of the activities that are set up in ‘choice time’ or ‘center time,’ and are described as play by some teachers, are in fact teacher directed and involve little or no free play, imagination, or creativity,” Mr. Miller said.

Other studies of pre-K and kindergarten classrooms by Robert C. Pianta, the dean of education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, confirm that children are not allotted much time for play, but spending more time on academics isn’t always the reason, Mr. Pianta said.

Mr. Pianta’s studies have shown that on average, about 30 percent of the school day is taken up by routine and classroom-management activities, such as lining up, making a transition to the next activity, or waiting for everyone to put materials away.

“It becomes clear that time is not well used,” he said, “whether it’s instruction or play.”

Mr. Pianta and other early-childhood experts have argued that teachers could be making better use of that time for conversation, learning, and building relationships with children.

“The issue is balance. This is something that public education is notoriously bad at,” said Marc Tucker, the president of the Washington-based National Center on Education and the Economy and one of many
who have called for changes in the education system aimed at giving students the skills to keep from falling behind their peers in other countries.

The center’s New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce released its “Tough Times or Tough Choices” report in 2006, listing high-quality early-childhood education programs for disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds as one of the steps needed for the nation to remain internationally competitive. That’s because children from poor families enter school without the vocabulary skills needed to do well in school, Mr. Tucker said.

“Cognitive development is very important and so is imaginative play,” he said, but added that it would be a shame if early-childhood classrooms became “just another opportunity for mind-deadening drill-and-kill programs.”

**Keeping Recess**

The push to keep, or in some cases, restore recess as an important part of the school day is also high on the list of goals for those concerned about the loss of free time.

Ms. Paley urged participants at the conference here to advocate two daily recess periods in elementary school.

And in his comments to the teachers, Michael Thompson, an Arlington, Mass.-based psychologist, consultant, and author, noted that 40 percent of elementary schools now offer less than 20 minutes of recess in a six-hour school day.

But Olga S. Jarrett, an early-childhood education professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta and the president of the U.S. affiliate of the International Play Association, said that she doesn’t think there are firm figures on recess, and that the trend probably goes up and down.

“I think there is a need for a proper study on this,” she said. While recess tends to be decided at the local level, the issue has reached lawmakers in at least one state.

A bill is moving through the New Jersey legislature that would establish a task force to study the benefits of recess and make recommendations on whether it should be mandatory.

“We hope to see the bill signed into law in the near future,” said Joseph R. Malone III, the state legislator sponsoring the Assembly version of the bill. A similar version is also moving through the state Senate. Michigan and Virginia have long had policies in favor of daily recess periods.

Recess advocates say that physical education classes should not be considered a replacement for recess, and that children tend to be even more active when they are initiating their own play.

Mr. Thompson maintains that participating in organized sports is also not an adequate substitute for play, often because it demands a lot of standing around and receiving instructions.

He attributes the rise in childhood obesity, anxiety and depression among children, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to the fact that children are missing out on “free, undirected play.”

But Mr. Thompson doesn’t blame the federal No Child Left Behind Act and academic pressure entirely for this loss of what the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights even declares a child’s right. “Screen time” spent in front of a television or computer, a loss of safe neighborhoods, and fearful parents are also obstacles to allowing children time to themselves or time with friends, he said.
Vehicle for Learning
Child-initiated play, not memorizing information, is the vehicle through which children develop many of the skills that education reformers and business leaders say they need, such as collaboration, critical thinking, and confidence, suggests Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a psychology professor at Temple University in Philadelphia.

In President-elect Barack Obama’s administration, early childhood education is expected to be “on the national agenda,” she said at the conference.

During his campaign, Mr. Obama talked about his support for high-quality preschool programs as well as services for infants and toddlers. ("School Spending Priority A Key Point of Difference For Presidential Hopefuls," July 16, 2008)

The topic of how best to balance play opportunities with academic goals, however, is not yet part of the discussion, Ms. Hirsh-Pasek said.

“Don’t just say preschool is important. How we do it is important,” she said, pointing out that preschoolers aren’t the only ones who need time to engage in play. “We really do have to bring our model into the elementary [grades].”