



*Summary and Recommendations of*

## **CRISIS IN THE KINDERGARTEN**

### **Why Children Need to Play in School**

*A report from the Alliance for Childhood by Edward Miller and Joan Almon*

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY to young children's healthy development and learning has been documented beyond question by research. Yet play is rapidly disappearing from kindergarten and early education as a whole. We believe that the stifling of play has dire consequences—not only for children but for the future of our nation. This report is meant to bring broad public attention to the crisis in our kindergartens and to spur collective action to reverse the damage now being done.

Kindergarten has changed radically in the last two decades. Children now spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standards and linked to standardized tests. In an increasing number of kindergartens, teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. These practices, which are not well grounded in research, violate long-established principles of child development and good teaching. It is increasingly clear that they are compromising both children's health and their long-term prospects for success in school.

The argument of this report, that child-initiated play must be restored to kindergarten, will be dismissed and even ridiculed in some quarters. In spite of the fact that the vital importance of play has been shown in study after study, many people believe that play is a waste of time in school. School, they say, should be a place for learning. There's plenty of time for play at home.

Skepticism about the value of play is compounded by the widespread assumption that the earlier children begin to master the basic elements of reading, such as phonics and letter recognition, the more likely they are to succeed in school. And so kindergarten education has become heavily focused on teaching literacy and other academic skills, and preschool is rapidly following suit.

The common misconceptions about young children's play fall apart when we look closely at what is really going on. We see the difference between superficial play and the complex make-believe play that can engage five-year-olds for an hour or more, fueled by their own original ideas and rich use of language. We start to distinguish between the sound of a chaotic classroom and the hum of energy when children are deeply engaged in the flow of play.

We also see the difference between didactic teaching of discrete skills in phonics, decoding, and word recognition, which may yield short-term gains in test scores in the early grades, and the deeper experiential learning whose benefits last into fourth grade and



beyond. Reading First, the \$6 billion federal program designed to help children from low-income families, greatly increased the amount of time children spent being taught discrete pre-reading skills in kindergarten and the early grades, but failed to improve reading comprehension.

### **Play Builds Competence in Many Domains**

Young children work hard at play. They invent scenes and stories, solve problems, and negotiate their way through social roadblocks. They know what they want to do and work diligently to do it. Because their motivation comes from within, they learn the powerful lesson of pursuing their own ideas to a successful conclusion.

Research shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language skills than nonplayers, better social skills, more empathy, more imagination, and more of the subtle capacity to know what others mean. They are less aggressive and show more self-control and higher levels of thinking.

Long-term research casts doubt on the assumption that starting earlier on the teaching of phonics and other discrete skills leads to better results. For example, most of the play-based kindergartens in Germany were changed into centers for cognitive achievement during a wave of educational “reform” in the 1970s. But research comparing 50 play-based classes with 50 early-learning centers found that by age ten the children who had played in kindergarten excelled over the others in a host of ways. They were more advanced in reading and mathematics and they were better adjusted socially and emotionally in school. They excelled in creativity and intelligence, oral expression, and “industry.” As a result of this study German kindergartens returned to being play-based again.

China and Japan are envied in the U.S. for their success in teaching science, math, and technology. But one rarely hears about their approach to schooling before second grade, which is playful and experiential rather than didactic. Finland’s children, too, go to playful kindergartens, and they enter first grade at age seven rather than six. They enjoy a lengthy, playful early childhood. Yet Finland consistently gets the highest scores on the respected international PISA exam for 15-year-olds.

It is true that poverty does not afflict Finland’s children as it does children in the U.S., and that children of poverty need special attention in preschool and kindergarten. But what they need is extra support to reap the full benefits of a play-based, experiential program. They may need more structure to begin with and guidance for entering into play, for many are inexperienced with it. They need a solid introduction to books, which most middle-class children have from infancy onwards, and they need to hear language used in conversation, storytelling, song, and verse. Equally important, they need to use language. Play is the foremost way that children use the language they are hearing.

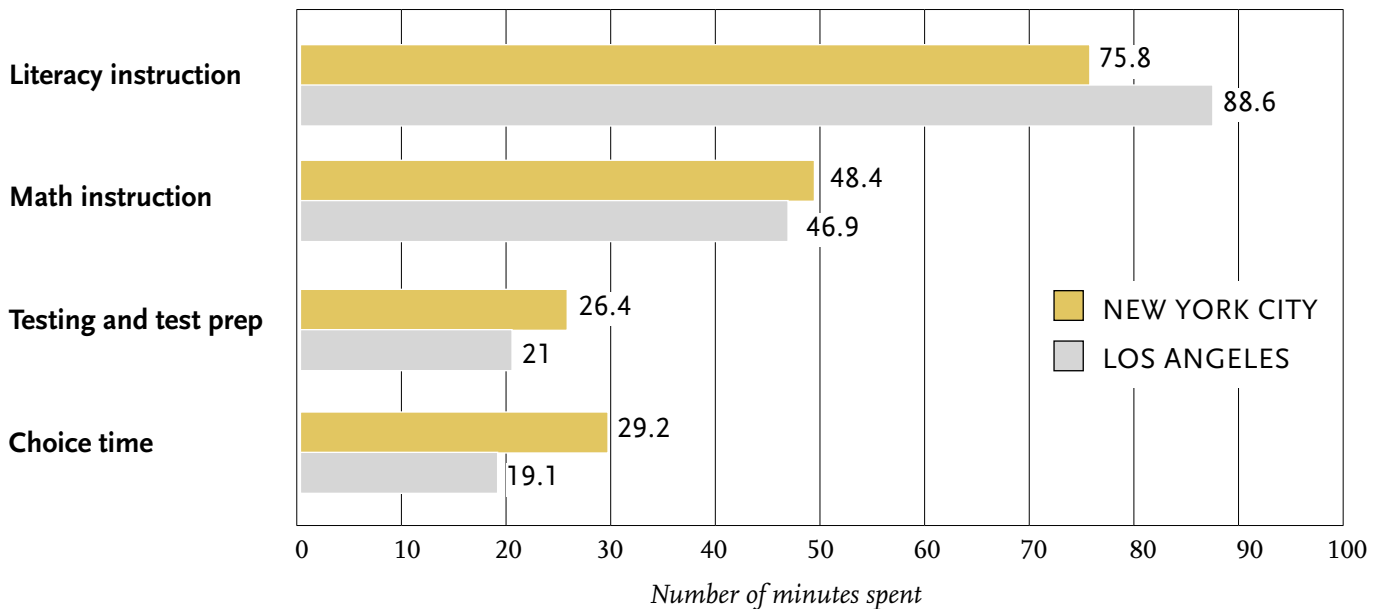
All young children, not just those living in poverty, need the support of teachers who understand the value of play. For the fact is that most children today don’t have enough playtime even at home. Many affluent children now need help entering into creative play because of the surfeit of media and organized activities in their lives. They struggle to bring their own ideas to the fore. As one kindergarten teacher put it, “If I give the children time to play, they don’t know what to do. They have no ideas of their own.”

This is a tragedy, both for the children themselves and for our nation and world. No human being can achieve his full potential if his creativity is stunted in childhood. And no nation can thrive in the 21st century without a highly creative and innovative workforce. Nor will democracy survive without citizens who can form their own independent thoughts and act on them.

### **How Kindergarten Has Changed**

The traditional kindergarten classroom that most adults remember from childhood—with plenty of space and time for unstructured play and discovery, art and music, practicing social skills, and learning to enjoy learning—has largely disappeared. The results of three new studies, supported by the Alliance for Childhood and described in this report, suggest that time for play in most public kindergartens has dwindled to the vanishing point, replaced by lengthy lessons and standardized testing.

The studies were conducted by researchers from U.C.L.A., Long Island University, and Sarah Lawrence

**CHART A: Daily Kindergarten Schedule in Two Cities** Average number of minutes spent daily in selected activities

College in New York. The researchers found that

- On a typical day, kindergartners in Los Angeles and New York City spend four to six times as long being instructed and tested in literacy and math (two to three hours per day) as in free play or “choice time” (30 minutes or less).
- Standardized testing and preparation for tests are now a daily activity in most of the kindergartens studied, despite the fact that most uses of such tests with children under age eight are of questionable validity and can lead to harmful labeling.
- Classic play materials like blocks, sand and water tables, and props for dramatic play have largely disappeared from the 268 full-day kindergarten classrooms studied.
- In many kindergarten classrooms there is no play-time at all. Teachers say the curriculum does not incorporate play, there isn’t time for it, and many school administrators do not value it.

Kindergartners are now under great pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards that until recently were reserved for first grade. At the

same time, they are being denied the benefits of play—a major stress reliever. This double burden, many experts believe, is contributing to a rise in anger and aggression in young children, reflected in increasing reports of severe behavior problems. Given the high rates of psychiatric disturbances among children today, it is critically important that early education practices promote physical and emotional health and not exacerbate illness.

High-stakes testing and test preparation in kindergarten are proliferating, as schools increasingly are required to make decisions on promotion, retention, and placement in gifted programs or special education classes on the basis of test scores. Yet relatively few kindergarten tests meet acceptable standards of reliability and validity. Standardized testing of children under age eight, when used to make significant decisions about the child’s education, is in direct conflict with the professional standards of every educational testing organization. Observational and curriculum-embedded performance assessments should be used instead. The argument that standardized testing takes less time and is therefore more efficient is called into question by new data suggesting that teachers are now spending 20 to 30 minutes per day preparing kindergarten children to take standardized tests.

## Long-Term Implications of the Disappearance of Play

The nine new studies and analyses on which this report is based all point to the same conclusion: kindergarten, long a beloved institution in American culture, is in crisis. If the problems are not recognized and remedied, the same ills will be passed on to preschools and even to programs for children ages birth to three.

The implications of these radical changes in early education practice reach far beyond schools. Until recently few people were talking about the long-term effects of the disappearance of children's play. Now, while many politicians and policymakers are calling for even more tests, more accountability, and more hard-core academics in early childhood classrooms, the leaders of major business corporations are saying that creativity and play are the future of the U.S. economy.

Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, writes about the "imagination economy," and says that "people have to be able to do something that can't be outsourced, something that's hard to automate and that delivers on the growing demand for nonmaterial things like stories and design. Typically these are things we associate with the right side of the brain, with artistic and empathetic and playful sorts of abilities." How can we expect our

**Too many schools place a double burden on young children. First, they heighten their stress by demanding that they master material beyond their developmental level. Then they deprive children of their chief means of dealing with that stress—creative play.**

children to thrive in the imagination economy of the future if we deny them opportunities for play and creativity in kindergarten?

We recognize that the restoration of child-initiated play to early education will not by itself solve the complex problems of helping all children—especially those with special needs or in poor families and neglected schools, as well as English-language learners—to reach their full potential. We are not calling for a simple return to the practices of an earlier time. We now understand much better the kinds of rich experiences that young children need in order to become avid learners. Teachers need to understand the ways in which child-initiated play when combined with playful, experiential learning leads to lifelong benefits in ways that didactic drills, standardized tests, and scripted teaching do not.

### Striking a Healthy Balance

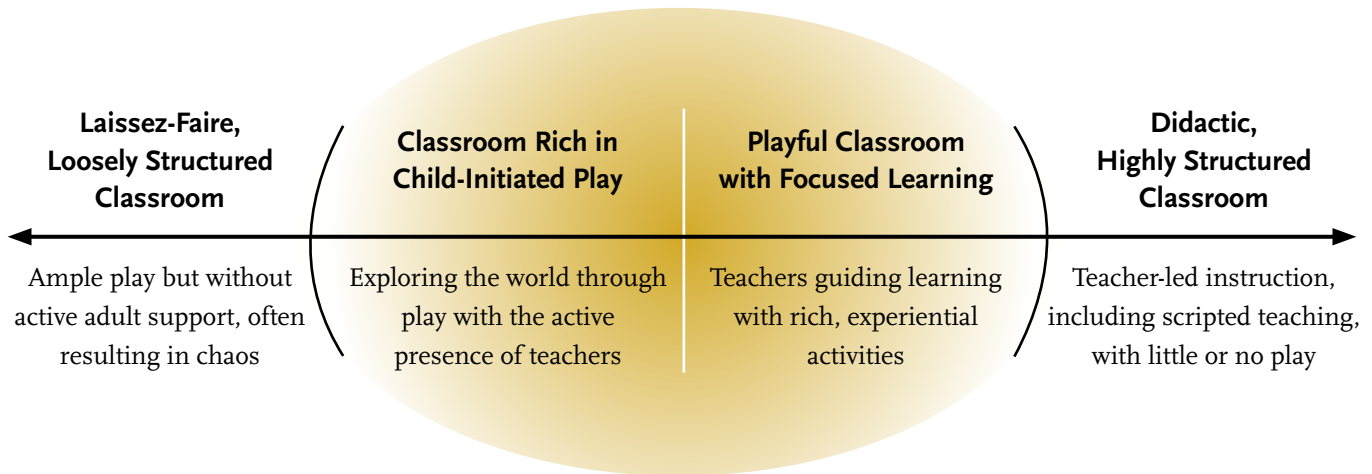
In a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean "anything goes." It does not deteriorate into chaos. Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergartners need a balance of child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers.

Early childhood researchers Elena Bodrova and Deborah Leong, in the September 2005 issue of *Educational Leadership*, described the problems with one-sided approaches to kindergarten:

In our experiences, we have found that both extremely chaotic classrooms and extremely teacher-directed classrooms are counterproductive to developing self-regulation and other underlying skills in children. Classrooms where children flit from activity to activity support reactive behavior. But when all the instruction is whole-group, students become too teacher-regulated.

We call for educators, their professional organizations, and policymakers to develop as fully as possible the two central methods in the continuum (illustrated on the following page) of approaches to kindergarten education:

## THE KINDERGARTEN CONTINUUM



The creation of a healthy balance described above has been blocked by current policies and government-imposed practices and programs, including No Child Left Behind and Reading First. These well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed mandates rely on testing and on didactic and scripted approaches—especially for teaching children from low-income backgrounds—in spite of the fact that these practices are not well supported by research evidence. Indeed, many of the current approaches to kindergarten education are based on unfounded assumptions and preconceptions about what is best for children and schools.

“The problem is not *political* but *ideological*,” writes Lilian Katz, who directed the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education for 30 years. “Ideologies are deeply held beliefs that fill the vacuum created by the unavailability of hard data. Our best strategy in such situations is to make our ideas and the data that we do have readily available to others who can subject them to vigorous argument and debate.”

If we are to best serve children and to foster the full professional development of early childhood educators, we must reject an ideological approach to teaching young children, consider all the evidence of decades of research and experience—not just the results of a few narrow tests of suspect validity—and begin a thorough reassessment of our kindergarten policies and practices.

### Creating the Playful Kindergarten

When children are given a chance to initiate play and exploratory learning, they become highly skilled in the art of self-education and self-regulation. The role of the teacher in supporting such an approach is subtler and more profound than the didactic or scripted pedagogue. She is attuned to the children’s play themes and builds on them, introducing new content and play materials to stimulate their minds. She knows the needs of individual children and helps them overcome obstacles in their lives that hinder learning. The play-based approach calls for teachers to know each child well and to differentiate the teaching methods to meet individual needs. It is the antithesis of the one-size-fits-all model of education.

Early childhood professionals recognize that the kindergarten is an “emerging” learner in literacy, math, and other areas. Guidelines developed at the Bank Street College of Education explain that emerging readers often know some letter names and words but might recognize them in one context and not in another. The emerging reader realizes that those printed squiggles on the page have meaning, even if he doesn’t yet know many of the meanings. Building a bridge from oral language to written language is vital in kindergarten. But the bridge must be built on a strong foundation of oral language and imaginative thinking, which are developed through play.

Teachers and parents can safely look ahead to second and third grade, when children typically become “early fluent” or “fluent” readers, without expecting all of them to be reading independently in kindergarten. Looking ahead without pushing ahead means introducing books, the alphabet, and other elements of literacy in playful ways, without the burden of long hours of drill and testing to meet inappropriate standards.

The skilled kindergarten teacher makes sure the classroom supports diverse forms of play, including large- and small-motor play, imaginative play, rough and tumble play, and rules-based play. Each of these develops important abilities. The playful kindergarten supports them all.

A challenge in educating teachers for playful kindergartens is that many younger teachers did not grow up with a strong experience of child-initiated play. Their free time was filled with electronic media and organized activities. They will need to experience play themselves to understand its role in effective education. The same can be said of younger parents. A major task—but a rewarding one—is to help parents and educators recapture the spirit of play.

The power of play as the engine of learning in early childhood and as a vital force for young children’s physical, social, and emotional development is beyond question. Children in play-based kindergartens have a double advantage over those who are denied play: they end up equally good or better at reading and other intellectual skills, and they are more likely to become well-adjusted healthy people.

Every child deserves a chance to grow and learn in a play-based, experiential preschool and kindergarten. Play works.

## Recommendations for Creating Effective and Healthy Kindergartens

To create effective and healthy kindergartens we call on policymakers, educators, health professionals, researchers, and parents to take action as follows:

1. **Restore child-initiated play and experiential learning with the active support of teachers to their rightful place at the heart of kindergarten education.**
  - Provide time and space for play to kindergartners every school day, both indoors and during recess.
  - Make room in kindergarten for all types of play that contribute to children’s development, including make-believe, sensory, language, construction, large- and small-motor, and mastery play.
  - Engage parents and educators in discussion of the role of play and experiential learning in healthy and effective kindergartens, so that they can advocate for play with school administrators and policymakers.
2. **Reassess kindergarten standards to ensure that they promote developmentally appropriate practices, and eliminate those that do not.**
  - Replace one-size-fits-all kindergarten standards with flexible guidelines based on well-grounded knowledge of children’s cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and creative development.
  - Recognize the differences between the kindergarten child who is an emergent reader and the first-grade child who has become an early reader. Recognize similar differences in children’s learning of math, science, and other topics. Do not expect kindergarten children to achieve academic goals best suited to first-graders.
  - Change developmentally inappropriate practices that cause normal child behavior and learning patterns to be wrongly labeled as misbehavior, attention disorders, or learning disabilities.
  - Eliminate the practice of kindergarten retention based on inability to meet rigid standards or to pass a particular test.

**3. End the inappropriate use in kindergarten of standardized tests, which are prone to serious error especially when given to children under age eight.**

- Use alternatives to standardized assessments in kindergarten, such as teacher observations and assessment of children’s work. Educate teachers in the use of these alternatives and in the risks and limitations of standardized testing of young children.

- Do not make important decisions about young children, their teachers, or their schools based solely or primarily on standardized test scores.

**4. Expand the early childhood research agenda to examine the long-term impact of current preschool and kindergarten practices on the development of children from diverse backgrounds.**

- Evaluate current kindergarten practices with qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Such research should assess children’s overall health and their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development at least until fourth grade.

- Replicate on a much larger scale the quantitative studies of kindergarten use of time and materials described in Chapter 2 of this report so that a representative sample of teachers in many different areas contribute to the full picture of current kindergarten practices.

- Investigate the associations between developmentally inappropriate kindergarten practices and behavioral and psychiatric disturbances and other health problems among young children.

**5. Give teachers of young children first-rate preparation that emphasizes the full development of the child and the importance of play, nurtures children’s innate love of learning, and supports teachers’ own capacities for creativity, autonomy, and integrity.**

- Make course work in child development and the use of play in the classroom mandatory in early childhood education programs.

- Give teachers professional development, mentoring,

and other support in learning how to encourage and support play, especially with children who have had limited opportunity to engage in creative play or who have poor self-regulation skills.

- Help teachers communicate with parents about the importance of play and ways to support it at home and in the community.

**6. Use the crisis of play’s disappearance from kindergarten to rally organizations and individuals to create a national movement for play in schools and communities.**

- Work across traditional boundaries of profession, geography, and interest group to advocate for play in classrooms, after-school and camp programs, parks and playgrounds, neighborhoods and cities.

- Establish local, state, and national play policies that recognize the importance of play for children of all ages—including the ways that play enhances physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development.

- Address the obstacles to play, such as unsafe neighborhoods, overscheduling of children’s lives, excessive screen time, toys linked to entertainment media, and education that emphasizes skills, drills, and homework and undermines creativity, imagination, and overall well-being.

The Alliance for Childhood’s Call to Action on the Education of Young Children has been signed by hundreds of educators and health professionals, including many leaders in these fields. The Call to Action and a complete list of signers can be found at the Alliance’s web site: [www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org).

## About the Alliance for Childhood

The Alliance for Childhood is a nonprofit partnership of educators, health professionals, and other advocates for children who are concerned about the decline in children's health and well-being and who share a sense that childhood itself is endangered. The Alliance was founded in 1999 and is incorporated in the state of Maryland. It is funded entirely by grants and donations from individuals, foundations, and businesses.

The Alliance promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. Our public education campaigns bring to light both the promise and the vulnerability of childhood. We act for the sake of the children themselves and for a more just, democratic, and ecologically responsible future.

The Alliance's campaign to restore play to kindergartens and preschools is supported by an advisory board of distinguished educators and health professionals.

## CRISIS IN THE KINDERGARTEN

### Why Children Need to Play in School

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The full report, and this summary, can be found at [www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org) in pdf format for downloading.

A print version of the full report is available for \$16 postpaid. Please contact the Alliance for Childhood for more information.



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