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Why free play matters and how to encourage it

Parents may feel the need to protect and schedule, but experts say our kids learn more when we get out of the way as they play.



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Studies show independent play is essential for children's development because it promotes imagination, creativity, cognitive and emotional development. (Photo: racorn/Shutterstock)

Like many parents of a certain age, I grew up riding my bike freely, playing pickup sports and settling disputes with my friends without adult intervention. But these days, many kids' lives are so structured with extracurricular activities or formal sports, they have little opportunity for free play and handling social situations on their own. Even if they do have time, many aren't allowed to roam their neighborhoods in search of playmates.

Mike Lanza, author of ["Playborhood: Turn Your Neighborhood Into A Place For Play,"](#) has the same fond memories of childhood play that I do, and couldn't imagine his three boys growing up without the freedom he had. So in 2008, he invented the notion of "playborhoods" when his oldest was 4. Lanza created an outdoor fun zone in his front yard and invited kids over for unstructured play while he built community with their parents. He believes kids' well-being suffers without a safe, supportive, involved neighborhood that provides opportunities for free play without adult intervention.

You may not agree with Lanza that independent play should be free of parents or risk (this [New York Times reporter](#) sure didn't when she took her kids to play at his house), but [studies show](#) independent play is essential for children's development because it allows children to engage with the world in an age-appropriate way, promoting imagination, creativity, cognitive and emotional development, as well as opportunities to master fears. That includes [taking risks](#). Structured lessons and sports don't count. It's when kids make their own decisions and experience trial and error that the best learning occurs. Even something as simple as wandering down the block to find out if a friend can play teaches a host of skills necessary for adulthood, including planning ahead, conversational skills, social graces when talking to an adult and regulating emotions such as disappointment or jealousy if the friend isn't available.

Julie Lithcott-Haims, author of ["How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success"](#) and former dean of freshmen at Stanford University, believes this generation of young adults has been micromanaged into depression and anxiety due to the college admissions arms race in some affluent communities, including Lanza's Silicon Valley area. But even in economically mixed communities, the scripted nature of after-school activities and sports has become the norm, with limited time for free play.

From her higher education perch, Lithcott-Haims asks parents to be less controlling of children's choices, and she advocates for unstructured time for play to develop emotional and social competence. Filled with strategies for kids to develop resilience and resourcefulness, "How to Raise an Adult" calls for a return to the norms I was raised with that now seem quaint — doing chores, speaking for myself and developing my own interests, including heading out for a twilight game of baseball with the boys. "Wince but don't pounce," Lithcott-Haims writes on the subject of risky play. That might not include heading up to the roof like Lanza allows his kids to do — it's OK to create some limits — but take a step back from guarding against all falls. (I admit, I have very fond memories of jumping off the roof — of course, my parents didn't know — and flinging myself off swings at their highest arc.)

Creating a 'playborhood'



Playing out where everyone can see each other brings other kids outdoors to play, too. (Photo: Iakov Filimonov/Shutterstock)

So how do you promote free play? Lead the way, as Lanza did, or brainstorm with neighbors for ideas on creating a kid-friendly playborhood environment. Here are a few key components to consider. Cost needn't be a mitigating factor.

Start with the neighbors. Successful free play depends on caring, involved families, either working together to create a shared space or coming to yours. Examples of larger-scale communities coming together include Portland, Oregon's [Share-it-Square](#) (started for \$65) and South Bronx's [Lyman Place](#). It's as simple as knocking on doors and introducing yourself.





Make it accessible. Avoid using fences, gates or other barriers because it's better to promote accessibility to the agreed-upon location. The play area works best if it's immediately available, either in your yard or on the sidewalk or other designated area, not a 10-minute walk to another location.

Ensure it's visible. Part of what naturally promotes free play is what I call "kidical mass." Who wants to go out when no one else is around? Playing out front where everyone can see each other brings others outdoors. If you don't have a front yard, a big patch of sidewalk, a driveway or a courtyard will do fine, Lanza says.







Make it fun for all ages. Lanza's yard has elements in the back and front, including a sandbox, trampoline, basketball hoop, water features and seating for visiting parents. However, you don't need a lot of money to get started. Keep costs down by purchasing equipment at yard sales or on Craigslist with an eye toward function over aesthetics. For ideas on project-based fun, consider the low-cost, creative components of "adventure playgrounds," such as [Berkeley's](#) wild playground, founded in 1979, or this north Wales [junkyard playground](#). Kids love building, hammering and sawing.

Scale back on formal activities . Kids need unscheduled time for free play. Avoid scheduling every afternoon, and [limit screen time](#) so outdoor play fits in. To get to know your neighbors, walk and bike when you can and greet neighbors, Lanza suggests. It's never too late to start, but beginning when kids are young allows them to get to know their adult neighbors and feel safe and comfortable.

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