Digital & Natural Play
How Electronic Devices Impact Childhood
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According to Peter Gray the decline of free play has been hard to quantify but still relatively vast.

Between 1981 and 1997, children ages 6 to 8 spent 25% less time in the United States in play while their time in school increased by almost 5 hours.

One sixteen year study through the University of Michigan, conducted in 1981 and again in 1997, followed how children spent their time. By sampling a large, representative sample of parents in the U.S, they found

- 145% increase in time spent on homework
- 168% increase in time spent shopping with family, and
- 25% decrease in play time, and
- 55% decrease in time conversing with family members (Gray, 2011, p. 445).

John Dewey warned a century ago that worship of secondary experience in childhood came at the risk of depersonalizing human life.

-from The Child and the Curriculum (1902)

The relationship between primary and secondary experience is not a simple one-way relationship, however. Not only do the objects of secondary experience explain the objects of primary experience, but the objects of primary experience work as a test on the theorizing that has occurred. If we forget the importance of attaching “the vice of pendulum theory . . . at both ends to the pillars of observed subject matter” (LW 1:11), we will find our inquiries failing. The most common kind of failing is a kind of hyper-intellectualism that equates the “real” with the idealized or the known, and consigns the merely experienced to an epistemological limbo. As Dewey writes, “the standing temptation of philosophy, as its course abundantly demonstrates, is to regard the results of reflection as having, in and of themselves, a reality superior to that of the material of any other mode of experience” (LW 1:36). His continued emphasis is on the need to return from the calm distillation of reflective experience to the rushing fullness of primary experience.

“Where is the wilderness, he wonders, “which now beckons creative energy and affords untold opportunity to initiative and vigor?” (Campbell, 1996, p. 159)

- John Dewey

Children live through their senses. Sensory experience link the child’s exterior world with their interior, hidden, affective world. Since the natural environment is the principal source of sensory stimulation, freedom to explore and play with the outdoor environment through the senses in their own space and time is essential for healthy development of an interior life. . . . This type of self-activated, autonomous interaction is what we call free play.

- Robin Moore, North Carolina State University

But then many of those born before 1964 had farms either in the family or were raised around farmland. That cultural link is now largely missing for American kids: US farms dropped from 40% in 1900 to 1.9% in 1990, according to the US Census Bureau; concurrently, the Census dropped its annual farm population report as of 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Real-world experiences, such as working on a car, stitching a quilt, catching a fish, growing a garden, etc. have been traded for indirect learning.

What can a child gain from a computer that competes with learning the same skill by hand?

In The Hand, Frank R. Wilson, neurology professor at Stanford University Medical Center, notes that computer experiences work against how people really learn, which is with their hands.

Children’s Media Use, By Platform
Among all 8- to 18-year-olds, amount of time spent with each medium in a typical day:

- TV content 4.29 hours
- Music/audio 2.21 hours
- Computers 1.29 hours
- Video games 1.13 hours
- Print 0.38 hours
- Movies 0.22 hours

Total media exposure 10:45 hours

Note: Children live through their senses, but many American kids lack the experience of farmland. (Source: Vivienne Mingard. "Children’s Media Use, By Platform." In The Hand, Frank R. Wilson, 2010.)
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How much is time outdoors associated with (the predictors) meeting daily energy expenditure, total time spent daily on video games, and rules in household for electronic media usage?

Media Exposure, Over Time
Among all 8- to 18-year-olds, total amount of media exposure in a typical day, over time:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOURS</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>7:39</td>
<td>8:33</td>
<td>10:45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How much is time outdoors associated with (the predictors) meeting daily energy expenditure, total time spent daily on video games, and rules in household for electronic media usage?

Facebook May Not Be So Friendly For Those With Low Self-Esteem


The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (d. 1980), mapped the stages of cognitive development in childhood. He frequently ran into what he called “the American question,” which is “How can we speed up the developmental process?”

When Walter Gilliam, head of the Child Study Center at Yale, surveyed almost 4,000 teachers from state-financed preschools, he learned that three- and four-year-old children were being expelled at three times the national rate for K-12 students. And 4.5 times more boys were being expelled from preschool than girls. Gilliam’s data showed a correlation between the amount of dramatic play in preschool and expulsion rates—less play, more expulsions.


Why Natural Play?

Time to Slow Down: Evidence from Abroad

In the 1970s Germany embarked on a similar plan to push early learning—turning its kindergartens into centers for cognitive achievement. But a study compared 50 play-based classes with 50 early-learning centers and found that "by age ten the children who had played 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."  

References


