

Independent Play



At our house, my husband and I do our best to keep the kids' screen time at a minimum, especially during the school week. This makes it harder on me as a stay-at-home mom because it means I have to spend more one-on-one time playing with and entertaining my kids, especially in the winter, or when the weather is bad and we're cooped up inside the house.

In order for me to get things done around the house, I started letting Lucy have independent playtime at a young age. When she was younger, around 18 months, I made sure I could see and hear her from wherever I was, but I let her play by herself in her room or the living room. I noticed that she would last about 30-45 minutes at a time. I've continued that practice with both her and my two-year old son, Arlo; Lucy is now almost five, and now that the kids have each other, it's a lot easier. They can play on their own for an hour, sometimes longer, up in their rooms. It gives me time to check emails, cook dinner, do laundry, or just have a rest.

There is a revolution that has been sweeping the world of children's play lately. Its intent is on fostering independence in children and encouraging them to exercise their imaginations. When my kids fight and Lucy runs to me to tell on her brother, she's expecting me to swoop in and fix her problem; instead I try to make them work it out for themselves. Partly I do this because I want them to learn their own coping skills and how to relate to each other in adverse situations. I must admit that it's also selfish—I don't want to have to deal with every disagreement they have.

Although guidance and supervision are necessary, children must be given the opportunity to

play on their own. The problem solving and decision making that are part of independent play is an enormously important part of a child's growth and development. Among other things, it builds self-confidence and courage. As parents, if we are constantly on top of them, giving them feedback and guiding their play, they don't have a chance to create their own solutions.

If the only toys we give our children are toys with a built-in play directive then they don't have the space to use their own imaginations and create their own personal world. Eventually they will lose the ability to entertain themselves while waiting in line at the grocery store or on a long car ride—an essential skill that benefits both them and us.

We are finally starting to understand how important independent free play is for young children and giving them opportunities to do so. There are now numerous play spaces that allow children to design or create their own activities with little adult intervention. There are playgrounds popping up with no traditional playground equipment at all other than Imagination Playground blocks, like the ones at WeeZee World, sand and water. The blocks are large blue foam pieces in several different shapes; they are based on promoting social, unstructured, child-directed play. Children can build and create any landscape they want and do with it what they please, tapping into their creativity and independent thinking.

At WeeZee, you can let your children free to wander and choose which direction they want to take their play. They can meet new friends and come up with their own games, play music together, build with the “blue blocks”, or whatever their imaginations decide without having their parents hovering over them. Parents can sit in the other room knowing that they're enjoying themselves and exercising their independence in a safe environment.

This free form of play is starting to spread. Other playgrounds are being constructed of nothing but old junk in a natural setting. Society is moving away from the rubber-floored playgrounds that we have gotten used to with the standard swing set, slide and sandbox.

In North Wales, in the UK, “The Land” is an adventure style playground that consists of nothing but old discarded furniture and junk, a rope swing above a creek, and a mud pits for digging with whatever kids can find. There are even fire pits where older children can, yes, build contained fires.

Claire Griffiths, the manager of The Land says, “The idea was that kids should face what to them seem like really dangerous risks’ and then conquer them alone.” There is someone there supervising, but adults are not meant to intervene unless absolutely necessary. Any toys that do get placed in The Land are often ignored. Understandably, it is enormously popular; kids can't wait for it to open each day.

For a long time, much of children's play has been planned out for them: computer games, battery-operated toys, even the drawings in coloring books are there for kids to color inside the lines. While there is a place for these types of games, when you allow a child to create their own drawings and allow them the free space to invent their own games with their own unique imaginations you encourage their free spirit to come through and it can take them much farther than any ready made, pre-packaged game ever will.

Source Links:

<http://anotherfarfromhome.com/2012/11/15/independent-play/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/19/science/19tierney.html>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/03/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/>

Imagination playgrounds in NYC:

<http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/imagination-playground>