

Kids need good, old-fashioned playtime

By Lindsey Tanner
The Associated Press

CHICAGO – Here’s some soothing medicine for stressed-out parents and over-scheduled kids: The American Academy of Pediatrics says what children really need for healthy development is more good, old-fashioned playtime.

Many parents load their children’s schedules with get-smart videos, enrichment activities and lots of classes in a drive to help them excel. The efforts often begin as early as infancy.

Spontaneous, free play – whether it’s chasing butterflies, playing with “true toys” like blocks and dolls, or just romping on the floor with Mom and Dad – often is sacrificed in the shuffle, a new academy report says.

Numerous studies have shown that unstructured play has many benefits. It can help children become creative, discover their own passions, develop problem-solving skills, relate to others and adjust to school settings, the academy report says.

“Perhaps above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood,” says the report, prepared by two academy committees for release today at the group’s annual meeting in Atlanta.

A lack of spontaneous playtime can create stress for children and parents alike. If it occurs because young children are plopped in front of get-smart videos or older children lose school recess time, it can increase risks for obesity. It may even contribute to depression for many children, the report says.

Social pressures and marketing pitches about creating “super children” contribute to a lack of playtime for many families. But so does living in low-income, violence-prone neighborhoods where safe places to play are scarce, the report says.

It says enrichment tools and organized activities can be beneficial but should not be viewed as a requirement for creating successful children. Above all, they must be balanced with plenty of free playtime, the report says.

“In the current environment where so many parents feel pressure to be super parents, I believe this message is an important one,” said Kenneth Ginsburg, the report’s lead author and a pediatrician at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

Noted pediatrician and author T. Berry Brazelton praised the academy’s report.

“I hope it will have some effect,” Brazelton said.

Children overscheduled with structured activities “are missing the chance they have to dream, to fantasize, to make their own world work the way they want it. That to me is a very important part of childhood,” Brazelton said.

Prescription? More playtime

***Free play should be promoted** as an essential part of childhood.

***Pediatricians can advocate** developing “safe spaces” where children from impoverished neighborhoods can play.

***Overuse of “passive entertainment”** such as television and computer games should avoided.

***“True toys”** such as dolls and blocks should be emphasized to allow kids to use their imaginations fully.

***Pediatricians should help** parents evaluate claims by marketers about products or programs designed to produce “super children”.

***Spending time together** talking and listening rather than loading kids up with extracurricular activities can help parents serve as role models and prepare children for success.

***Parents should avoid** conveying an unrealistic expectation that every child needs to excel in many areas to be a success.

***Pediatricians should assess patients** for symptoms of stress that may stem from having too many activities scheduled.