

The Shape of Play Today  
Children's Museum of Maine  
*Kitetails, Winter 2007*

Recently there has been a renewed concern and controversy about how our children should spend their free time. On the one side, the Society of Research in Child Development (SRCD) reports ("The Benefits of Busy," Newsweek, October 2, 2006) that the more kids are involved in structured after school and enrichment activities, the better kids are on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment. In contrast, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends (Clinical Report on Play, October 9, 2006) unscheduled family time and free, child-centered play to build creativity and emotional resiliency in children.

Several factors are driving this concern for how children make use of their time. More families rely on outside childcare or after school programs while parents are at work. More families are aware that the first years of life are essential to future learning and want to make the most of their child's time. More families feel pressure to prepare their children for the competitive preschool, private school and college admissions process. Additionally, many families believe that unsupervised outside play just isn't safe anymore.

On the upside, what has also changed is the resources available to children and families. Take for example children's museums. In 1975 there were approximately 38 children's museums in the United States. Eighty new children's museums opened between 1976 and 1990, and today there are more than 300. The Children's Museum of Maine opened to the public in 1977 - almost 30 years ago!

Children's museums have successfully reinterpreted play for today's families. We keep the best of traditional approaches to play - child-centered, hands-on exploration for the whole family. We also provide recommendations on how parents and caregivers can be play mentors at the museum and in everyday situations - as well as tips on when it's best to step back and just watch the children play. We exist to provide families with fun, engaging exhibits and programs in a healthy and nurturing environment.

For many families, visiting a children's museum is a chance to get away from household distractions, to meet friends and to spend quality family time. When caregivers and children enter a children's museum, they leave the adult-centric world behind and step into a place designed with the child in mind.

One of the best outcomes from the reports is that the concept of play, whether structured or unstructured, is receiving national attention. For many years play has been taken for granted as something that just happens and something separate from learning. The Children's Museum of Maine believes that play is an invaluable medium for developmental and emotional learning. And we celebrate it every day. Though times are different, the opportunity for peer, family and community interaction, creative expression and discovery is still available. And luckily for our community it's just around the corner. As the late Fred Rogers said, "Play is the real work of childhood."

And this children's museum couldn't agree more.