**Want better school outcomes? Make play a priority.**

*By Kimberly Kopko….* (excerpt from the Albany Times Union).

Children and families have embarked on another school year — an opportunity for growth, learning and, for many, a return to high-quality instruction and mentorship that was so disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. But with the return of school comes another reality for teachers and caregivers: Children are struggling with social and emotional skills at staggering rates.

A 2022 survey of 846 public schools conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics showed that 87% of schools said the pandemic had a negative impact on children’s socio-emotional development during the past academic year, and 84% agreed that students’ behavioral development also has been stunted. In March, New York state released a report citing data from the same survey showing that New York experienced even greater declines than the nation in fourth-grade math and reading.

In schools and at home, a picture is emerging of the immediate social and emotional impacts on children during the pandemic. It is clear from a growing increase in requests for mental health services that children of the COVID-19 generation need robust academic, social and emotional support to rebound.

In these stressful times, parents and teachers should turn to a fundamental but too often overlooked priority of child development: play.

Play is neurorestorative to a brain affected with stress. Developmentally appropriate play meets the child where they are and reminds the young brain that the world can feel manageable and secure, allowing the nervous system to calm. Play also builds the more creative, curious and problem-solving areas of the brain known as executive function skills. These skills help a child self-regulate and control their own behavior; they also grow and adapt over a child’s life, and providing the opportunity to exercise them can be instrumental to children’s development.

Unfortunately, schools in New York aren’t prioritizing play to the level our kids need. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the value of play for children, concerns about learning loss are instead leading to a counterproductive doubling down on academics. Schools are eliminating recess in an effort to spend more time raising test scores and teaching more challenging curricula.

Connecticut lawmakers have recently proposed a “play bill” that would “incorporate play-based learning in grades prekindergarten to five, inclusive, for the purpose of improving the development of students’ executive functions and reducing the negative impact of high levels of childhood anxiety.” As in Connecticut, it is time for New York to issue a crucial call to prioritize play. Doing so requires a fundamental shift in our cultural understanding of what is needed for children’s learning and healthy growth and development, and a true acceptance that learning occurs through play, just as it does through academic and structured activities.

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that children play their way into learning. In a culture that values academics over play, children deserve the opportunity to engage in the form of learning that is best for them. As adults, we need to advocate to ensure they are able to do so. It is time for New York to follow Connecticut’s lead and act to incorporate play in classrooms.

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