

Psychology Today: A Nation of Wimps by Hara Estroff Marano

In the hothouse that child raising has become, play is all but dead. Over 40,000 U.S. schools no longer have recess. And what play there is has been corrupted. The organized sports many kids participate in are managed by adults; difficulties that arise are not worked out by kids but adjudicated by adult referees.

"So many toys now are designed by and for adults," says Tufts' Elkind. When kids do engage in their own kind of play, parents become alarmed. Anderegg points to kids exercising time-honored curiosity by playing doctor. "It's normal for children to have curiosity about other children's genitals," he says. "But when they do, most parents I know are totally freaked out. They wonder what's wrong."

Kids are having a hard time even playing neighborhood pick-up games because they've never done it, observes Barbara Carlson, president and cofounder of Putting Families First. "They've been told by their coaches where on the field to stand, told by their parents what color socks to wear, told by the referees who's won and what's fair. Kids are losing leadership skills."

A lot has been written about the commercialization of children's play, but not the side effects, says Elkind. "Children aren't getting any benefits out of play as they once did." From the beginning play helps children learn how to control themselves, how to interact with others. Contrary to the widely held belief that only intellectual activities build a sharp brain, it's in play that cognitive agility really develops. **Studies of children and adults around the world demonstrate that social engagement actually improves intellectual skills.** *It fosters decision-making, memory and thinking, speed of mental processing.* This shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, the human mind is believed to have evolved to deal with social problems.