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UNSTRUCTURED PLAY: THE WAY FOR CREATIVITY AND ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

□ Dr. Jayakumar K.

ABSTRACT

Play is an essential element of constructive youth development. Youth should involve in all three forms of play (unstructured, semi structured, and structured) to promote physical literacy, motor skill ability and muscle strength, long-term athletic development, and fun. We give emphasis is too often placed on structured play, such as playing on a sports team, potentially at the expense of motor skill mastery. Overuse, injury, and dropping out of sports are possible consequences of sports specialization. This article describes how play positively impacts athleticism and lifetime contribution in physical activity and mentions how to balance and mix free play into sports practice.

Keywords:- Unstructured Play, Creativity, Athlete Development.

Introduction

Today's most sports for youth are structured and organised, where, there are strict rules, coaches, officials, defined teams, schedules and parental involvement. But youngsters also play sport or games of alternative type, which has been labelled unorganized, unstructured, or informal. Observational studies have revealed incredible differences in the philosophy and application of these two approaches to sport competitions.

Unstructured play can be demarcated as times when an adult is not shaping the interaction between youth. What parts unstructured play from other types of play is that unstructured play is driven completely by the youth and not the adult, giving rise to the term free play. Youth are in whole control and make all decisions such as what they play, how they play, and with whom they play. In this form of play, if an adult is present, it is only to observe the play, making sure the youth are safe and are abiding by the rules of safety—adults do not organize or structure the activities.

Over time, there has been a decline in the amount of free, unstructured play in which children

participate. Children have 12 percent less free time per week available to them when compared with 20 years ago. How children spend their free time has changed as well. There has been a 50 percent decrease in outdoor activities and a 25 percent decrease in free play overall. There is a host of factors that may have contributed to these shifts such as overpopulated neighbourhoods, loss of community, societal overemphasis on sports, perceived unsafe neighbourhoods, and single-parent families. Play has transformed from child organized pickup games to more adult-organized involvement in sport leagues or, in other words, has become more institutionalized.

Benefits of Unstructured Play

There are several distinct benefits of unstructured free play for child development, including increasing intrinsic motivation for physical activity, allowing children to explore a variety of movements and physical activities without pressure from adults, and enhancing social-emotional learning have postulated that unstructured activities, such as spontaneous skill practice in free time, youth-led pickup activities, and

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ormal play, promote the development of innovation, creativity, adaptability, and flexibility, marks of expertise in sport. The term deliberate was coined to differentiate such unstructured activities from adult-led structured deliberate practice, indicating a shift in focus to child-led activities for enjoyment with the ability to adapt from the adult norms. Research on the impact of unstructured deliberate play on sport success suggests that, for children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, the amount of time children spend in unstructured play has a direct impact on continued success in sport. Bailey et al. contends that periods of re-entry to sport are critical in the overall positive development of youth. Re-entry is a concept where intentional breaks from sports and sports seasons are included to provide deliberate play opportunities not only in one sport but in a variety of sports and games. Without providing youth opportunities to engage in deliberate, unstructured play, the multiple benefits of unstructured play on physical activity and sports participation will be diminished. One of the important benefits of free play is that it functions as a mental break, which is necessary for individuals of all ages but notably important to youth because youth need these breaks more often than adults. A mental break is especially important in situations where tasks are performed in an extended period of time such as classwork or sport-specific drills. Another benefit of participating in free play is that it creates a unique environment for children to learn and practice social skills. When adults are not involved in decision making in play, youth are then empowered to work in groups, share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts. Without adult intervention in play, youth are able to learn decision-making skills, at their own pace, and independently discover areas of interest to them. In addition to this, during unstructured play youth develop their abilities to control their own cognitive and emotional processes, or to "self-regulate". Self regulation is an important part of child development and can serve as a predictor of a child's academic achievement and their overall well-being. So the benefits of unstructured form of play are listed and briefly explained.

Creativity

With the freedom to play, your child will become more creative and begin to think outside of the box. It might get messy, but they will begin to use their imagination to create their own games and visualise stories, using their imagination.

Problem Solving

In their own games and unstructured play, children will face challenges like who should take the first turn, and it is in these scenarios where they begin to establish rules and work through everyday problems. Problem-solving is a key skill that helps develop critical thinking and improve cognitive development in children.

Social Skills

One of the biggest things unstructured play promotes is teamwork and communication. Your child's play will develop scenarios where your child will learn how to ask questions, listen and share their experiences. But more importantly, it will encourage your child to make friends with other children.

Provides Opportunity

In structured activities, your child is exposed to skills and processes that will help them develop. In unstructured play, your child has the opportunity to master those skills and further improve their development.

Builds Motor Function

Children have lots of energy, but they also require lots more movement time than adults to develop motor skills such as walking, grabbing a water bottle, bouncing a ball and holding a pen. Unstructured play gives them the freedom to develop these skills and understand their movements. It also reduces the likelihood of childhood obesity and improves cardiovascular health.

Emotional Development

Provides your child with challenges where they can push themselves and learn how to control motor functions. Behind the scenes, these activities also help your child develop self-confidence and determination to keep trying. It improves their

emotional state by allowing them to learn how to self-regulate their responses and associate certain challenges with positive interactions and experiences.

Builds Resilience

Things won't always go the way your child would want them to, but unstructured play provides them with a space to experience this feeling in a safe and comforted environment. Things not working out allows your child to develop resilience and promotes perseverance and problem-solving.

Develops Negotiation and Decision Making Skills

As mentioned above, unstructured play generally encourages teamwork. Within a team or small group, your child will learn how to negotiate to get what they want, make compromises and develop decision-making skills that will assist them in structured play. These skills are important as they also assist in emotional development and cognitive reasoning to help your child develop an awareness of other people's feelings.

Eliminates Boredom

Unstructured play promotes imagination, and after a few tries at it, it will eliminate your child's feelings of boredom. This is because unstructured play acts as a vehicle for enhancing inventiveness, imagination and improving your child's happiness through play.

Limitations of Unstructured Free Play

Although the benefits are wide ranging, especially in areas outside of physical activity and health, there are limitations. Free play alone is not challenging enough to keep participation. As mentioned previously, the form of play must provide experiences that are both highly enjoyable and require high levels of concentration and challenge. Free play alone does not provide an experience that is challenging enough to require youth to exert high levels of effort. In addition to its limitations regarding motivation, it also does not guarantee appropriate motor skill development. Motor skill development is age related, not age-determined. In other words, many 5-year-olds can perform the locomotor skill of skipping (age-

related), but not all 5-year-olds can skip just because they are 5 years old (age-determined). Without instruction, motor skill development is unlikely to occur during unstructured play. The concept illustrated above underscores the need for qualified youth practitioners, especially during the neuroplastic formative elementary school years, when motor skills need to be taught and reinforced. Strength and conditioning specialists have a unique opportunity to help children develop motor skill mastery and movement competence, precursors of athleticism. Teaching and reinforcing correct exercise technique are critically important at this stage of youth development. As children approach adolescent awkwardness, it is theorized that developmentally appropriate instruction in fundamental motor skills should continue to be emphasized in semistructured and structured play because adolescents get accustomed to their new bodies.

Long-Term Athletic Development

Long-term athletic development suggests fundamental motor skills and all fitness attributes are trainable across childhood and adolescence. Therefore, a planned, systematic long term progression of skills and abilities for sports, fitness, strength and conditioning, physical education, and physical activity that matches the endowment of each youth would lead not only to better performance by those with that endowment but improved health and wellness for the entire population.

A Developmental Approach for Children

Using a developmental participation approach, all children should be exposed to a variety of movement patterns, fundamental motor skills, and health- and skills-fitness instruction. In a youth-focused delivery model for children, youth sport would not need to be structured for all ages according to sport season with focus on the fundamentals of that sport, but rather would be part of the process of showcasing ability in the aforementioned skills and how they apply across a broad spectrum of sports and physical activities. For example, a system whereby a specific skill such as deceleration is taught to all children, then reinforced during drills, skills, and play (free and

structured/ competitive) where each child can demonstrate progressive levels of proficiency in application of deceleration for invasion games (stopping before attacking the net), running games (stopping at second base), or chasing games (stopping before overrunning an opponent), could be applied in a variety of settings and across all sport domains. Featured contests for any sport could be offered at any time, without obligation for specific uniforms, seasons, etc. (reminiscent of elementary school "Field Day").

Instead of punishing bad performance with exercise, use free play time to reward desired performance and effort. Although at face value this might seem to be just for fun, during these games, such as sharks and minnows, youth will also be gaining skills such as agility and acceleration. Focus all programming to be child-centered. Meaning, the development of physical literacy and fundamental motor skills should be emphasized more than winning. Make sure children sample various sports becoming multisport athletes, and that time spent in these sports is age appropriate. Hit the TARGET Task—use a variety of tasks that are challenging, interesting, and meaningful; tasks need not be the same for all athletes Authority—allow your athletes to get involved in making some of the decisions; give them a choice in which tasks or drills to work on Recognition—use private recognition for individual accomplishments so that you are not inviting social comparison Grouping—group athletes heterogeneously for drills Evaluation—stress evaluation based on individual success and achievement of individual goals rather than using social comparison Timing—not all athletes learn skills at the same pace; allow adequate practice and playing time for even the most skilled Teach Games for Understanding instead of emphasizing specific movement technique, focus on the development of getting a tactical understanding of the sport. Practice sport skills by playing modified versions of the sport and games that will enhance the understanding and awareness in full-game contexts. Emphasize appreciation of the game itself as opposed to simply focusing on winning the game. Encourage tactical awareness so that the children learn to solve problems posed in the game and to gain relevant knowledge for performance. This initial emphasis

is followed by developing decision making, which leads to knowing what to do and how to do it in relation to specific tactical situations. Assess skill execution and performance by observing the outcomes of decisions as they are executed by the children during actual game. Set aside time for youth to invent and explore. Allow them to create their own version of the sport. They can make changes to the rules of the existing game, play a different position, or change the structure of the game entirely. Have a family night at the training facility where the youth can teach their parents and guardians the new versions of the games they created, and everyone can play it together.

Conclusion

Free and unstructured play is healthy and essential for children. It is cognitively stimulating and helps children develop intrinsic interests, follow rules, learn to solve problems and make decisions, exert self-control, learn to regulate their emotions, and form friendships. This is not to suggest that structured play does not have a purpose. To the contrary, structured play offers several benefits of its own and should also be a part of a child's development. However, it is the authors' contention that structured play currently is valued more than free play, resulting in children not participating in it as often. If optimal childhood development is the goal, then there needs to be a better balance between the various forms of play on the spectrum. Each structure of the play continuum offers unique benefits for youth development. Structured play, particularly through strength and conditioning preparation for sport, delivers learning of motor skills that serve as the foundation of movement, the development of sport-specific skills, discipline, and teamwork. On the other side, unstructured free play delivers ownership, empowerment, leadership skills, and planning skills. By incorporating more free play into sports practice sessions, youth will increase the likelihood of gaining quality learning experiences that are critical for long-term physical activity and sport participation.

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