

## Playtime Is Over

Recess is no longer child's play. Schools are increasingly hiring "recess coaches" to oversee students' free time. Critics have suggested that such coaching is another example of the over-scheduling and over-programming of our children.

A University of Michigan study found that from 1979 to 1999, children lost eight hours of free time a week for unstructured play and outdoor activities. That number has likely increased by now because many schools have eliminated recess in favor of more time for classes. One consequence of these changes is the disappearance of what child-development experts call "the culture of childhood." This culture, which is found all over the world, includes songs, riddles, and rhymes passed on by one generation of children to another. Children's games like marbles, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek date back hundreds of years.

Participating in the culture of childhood was a socializing process. Children learned to settle their own quarrels, to make and break their own rules, and to respect the rights of others. They learned that friends could be cruel as well as kind, and that life was not always fair.

We have to adapt to childhood as it is today. The question isn't whether recess coaches are good or bad but whether they help students form the age-old bonds of childhood. To the extent that the coaches focus on play, give children freedom of choice about what they want to do, and stay out of the way as much as possible, they are likely a good influence.

In any case, recess coaching is a vastly better solution than eliminating recess in favor of more academics. Not only does recess aid personal development, but studies have found that children who are most physically fit tend to score highest on tests of reading, math, and science.

Adapted from "Playtime Is Over" by David Elkind. *The New York Times*, March 27, 2010, Section A, page 19. Used by permission of *The New York Times*.

### Writing Directions

Read the passage above and write an essay responding to the ideas it presents. In your essay, be sure to summarize the passage in your own words, stating the author's most important ideas. Develop your essay by identifying one idea in the passage that you feel is especially significant, and explain its significance. Support your claims with evidence or examples drawn from what you have read, learned in school, and/or personally experienced.

Remember to review your essay and make any changes or corrections that will help your reader follow your thinking. You will have 90 minutes to complete your essay.

## Jogging Your Brain

It is not clear whether mental-training games can improve your intellect, but it turns out that there is another, easy-to-achieve, scientifically proven way to make yourself smarter. Go for a walk or a swim. Scientists in just the past few months have discovered that exercise, the latest data suggests, does more to bolster thinking than thinking does.

The evidence comes from several new studies of lab animals living in busy, exciting cages. Last year, a team of researchers led by Justin S. Rhodes, a psychology professor at the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois, placed mice in different living arrangements. One group lived in a world of exciting foods, dining on nuts, fruits and cheeses. They also had colorful plastic beds and toys. Group 2 had access to all of these pleasures, plus they had small running wheels in their cages. A third group's cages contained the running wheels but no other toys or treats.

After several months, scientists studied the animals' brain activities.

"Only one thing had mattered," Rhodes says, "and that's whether they had a running wheel." Animals that exercised, whether or not they had any toys in their cages, had healthier brains and performed significantly better on cognitive tests than the other mice. Animals that didn't run did not improve their brainpower. "They loved the toys," Rhodes says. But unless they also exercised, they did not become smarter.

Exercise seems to slow or reverse the brain's physical decay, much as it does with muscles. And although scientists thought until recently that humans were born with a certain number of brain cells and would never generate more, they now know better. Scientists found that exercise jump-starts the making of new cells. Mice and rats that ran for a few weeks generally had about twice as many new neurons in their hippocampi as sedentary animals. Their brains, like other muscles, were bulking up.

Excerpted from "Jogging Your Brain" by Gretchen Reynolds, *The New York Times*, 4/18/12

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## School's Lesson Plan: No More Homework

Junior high students at the Marya Yates School in Matteson simply had too many Web sites to surf, and television shows to watch in order to sit diligently at their kitchen tables and crank out homework. School administrators saw they were fighting a losing battle outside their walls. But they were confident most students were absorbing the lessons in class. So what did they do? They virtually eliminated homework.

Homework used to account for about 30 percent of students' grades. The shift in policy began after Principal Lucille Adams Johnson consulted with teachers a few years ago about why so many students were earning C's when tests and quizzes showed they had command of the material. The answer was simple: homework. "Teachers were assigning it. Kids weren't doing it. "Teachers found themselves entering dozens of zeros where better grades should have been," Adams Johnson said. As the policy has evolved, homework at Marya Yates now accounts for roughly 10 percent of grades, with some teachers making it as small a factor as possible.

But education experts are divided on the wisdom of adapting to the desires of junior high students, with some praising that flexibility and others noting that being able to study on one's own becomes crucial in high school and beyond. Harris Cooper, director of Duke University's Program in Education, has studied homework for 20 years. Cooper said there is only a modest correlation between homework completion and academic success for middle school children, but the connection between the two becomes much stronger in high school. "Homework teaches children study and time-management skills," he said. "All kids should be doing homework," he said.

Melinda Anderson, spokeswoman for the National Education Association, said schools should be allowed to tailor their policies depending upon their students' needs, but they shouldn't give up on homework as a valuable tool. "In dealing with the issue of homework compliance, the answer should not be to bend to the whims of youngsters or adolescents," she said. "An alternative would be to establish a reasonable policy—10 minutes times the grade level seems to be a standard measure—and talk to parents."

The school has an obligation to make sure its graduates are ready to compete later on with students from other schools--kids who grew up with homework. "It's not just what [the school] is doing for itself, but how it is preparing kids for high school and the kids they will be competing against," Alfred Hess Jr., professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University said. "Are they equivalently prepared?" Adams Johnson said that from every indication she has, her students are more than adequately prepared for high school.

Excerpted from "School's Lesson Plan: No More Homework" by Jo Napolitano, *Chicago Tribune* 5/8/05

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