

ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD
www.allianceforchildhood.org

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For immediate release—October 12, 2006

**SCHOOL FAILURE MAY BE LINKED TO LACK OF PLAY
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD, SAY EXPERTS**

“In too many schools, play has become a four-letter word.” —Joan Almon

College Park, MD—Too little time for unstructured play leads to increased stress for children and parents, according to a new clinical report issued this week by the American Academy of Pediatrics. Nevertheless, many parents and policy makers continue to believe that pressuring young children to learn earlier and faster will help them succeed in school. In fact, it may have just the opposite effect.

Experts say there is a serious disconnect between scientific knowledge of child development and popular ideas about how and when to introduce formal instruction, according to the nonprofit Alliance for Childhood. Parental pressure combined with flawed policies are among the reasons why creative play, long considered the foundation of the early childhood curriculum, is now disappearing from preschools and kindergartens, says Alliance President Joan Almon.

A recent Public Agenda survey, for example, found a huge divergence of opinion between teachers and parents about the amount of testing children are subjected to: 71 percent of teachers think there are too many standardized tests, but only 17 percent of parents think so.

“Teachers know that imaginative play is the way young children discover the world for themselves and become lifelong learners,” says Almon. “But misguided policies that require increasing amounts of formal instruction—and even scripted teaching—are forcing teachers in kindergartens and preschools to do things that they know are wrong and counterproductive. In too many schools, play has become a four-letter word.”

Many experts in child development link the increased pressure on young children and the decline of play to later school failure. A “Call to Action on the Education of Young Children,” issued by the Alliance for Childhood and signed by more than 150 leading educators, physicians, and other experts, calls for a reversal of education policies that cut time for child-initiated play and emphasize formal instruction.

“We are deeply concerned that current trends in early education, fueled by political pressure, are leading to an emphasis on unproven methods of academic instruction and

unreliable standardized testing that can undermine learning and damage young children's healthy development," the Alliance statement says. "Preschool education must not follow the same path that has led kindergartens toward intense academic instruction with little or no time for child-initiated learning. If such practices were effective for five-year-olds, we would have seen better long-term results by now.

"Justified concern for low-income children...has been a powerful force behind the current overemphasis on early instruction in literacy and math," the statement continues. "This well-intentioned but misguided policy may actually put children at increased risk of school failure by denying them positive early learning experiences."

The signers include Harvard professors Howard Gardner and Kathleen McCartney, pediatricians T. Berry Brazelton and Mel Levine, child psychiatrists Kyle Pruett, Alvin Poussaint, and Stanley Greenspan, MacArthur Award-winning educator Deborah Meier, and authors Jonathan Kozol and Daniel Goleman.

"At a meeting last week with the New York City early education department, I heard the cry of professionals who believe that unrealistic new preschool standards and assessments might push children over the edge," says Temple University Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, another signer of the statement. "There was actually an initiative to remove blocks from preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Perhaps policy makers do not know that play with blocks builds the foundation for mathematics, language skills, and spatial development."

Psychologist Jane Healy, also a signer, said that the Alliance's call to action is "important for all children, but especially for those disadvantaged by inadequate living conditions, stressed parents, too much television, and violent neighborhoods. They, most of all, need a childhood of which they are being deprived."

Alliance president Joan Almon says she hopes that the new report by the Academy of Pediatrics will go a long way toward educating parents and policy makers about the central importance of play in healthy development and dispelling the widespread but false idea that play is a waste of time. "The AAP has done children and families a great service with this report," says Almon. "When children play, family life is enriched and children learn more deeply. Everyone concerned with the well-being of children should read the report and take it to heart."

The Alliance for Childhood Call to Action is posted, with a complete list of signers, at www.allianceforchildhood.org. The American Academy of Pediatrics report on play is posted at <http://www.aap.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf>.