

Play has increasingly become undervalued in the United States.

The increasing emphasis on cognitive and preliteracy skills, even

during the infant and toddler years, has led to a decline in the value of play. This is reflected in the fact that play is now often seen as a waste of time, rather than a valuable learning experience. The result is that children are spending less time playing and more time in structured activities. This is a trend that is likely to continue unless we take steps to re-evaluate the value of play in our society.

suggests that children in child care and Head Start spend far too little time engaged in vigorous physical activity during the hours they attend the center. The researchers used instruments that measure movement to record the physical activity of children in nine Head Start and child care centers in South Carolina. Results of the study found



(see photos throughout this article for a sample of their work) and training programs that help child care centers develop site-specific play and learning designs as well as related educational programs. The NLI Web site provides recommended readings, links, and other resources on a wide range of topics related to the importance of the natural environment for children.

**T**here is undisputed consensus that prevention of overweight and obesity must begin early in life to address the increasingly unhealthy and sedentary lifestyle of children. Environments that promote and support active and

energy-expending opportunities and that allow for the free, unrestricted movement of young bodies must be seen as a necessity, not a luxury for our children. Primary prevention efforts to address obesity and overweight in infants and toddlers will need the cooperation and collaboration of the whole community. Here are some examples of recommended actions:

- Parents and caregivers can balance time inside with time outside and can give children ample opportunities for unrestricted movement.
- Pediatricians can remain alert for the onset of overweight and obesity and can inform parents of the importance of

good nutrition and physical activity for themselves and their children.

- New and future child care centers can plan more carefully to allow theories about the built environment to influence architectural designs for both indoor and outdoor environments.
- Existing child care centers can begin to naturalize play areas, use outdoor environments for learning and development, significantly increase time and activity in the outdoors, and support teachers and caregivers in learning how to use outdoor play areas as part of the curriculum.
- State licensure agencies can become more aware of the restrictions imposed on child care centers either by regulations or by the interpretation of regulations by licensure consultants.
- Architects and landscape designers for child care centers can become more informed regarding the needs of young children and the importance of design in influencing movement, motion, and physical activity.
- Society in general, especially in the United States, can be more tolerant of the needs of infants and toddlers for movement, mobility, and free play, not only on playgrounds and in backyards but in public spaces, as well. §

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## References

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