

Mucking around' takes back seat to organised sport and screen time for kids, report finds

By Louise Merrillees

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The inaugural Active Healthy Kids Australia Report Card, which ranks the physical activity of Australian kids against 14 other nations, found 80 per cent of children between the ages of five and 17 were not getting daily exercise.

Nature Play WA's chief executive Griffin Longley said while Australia did well in terms of engagement in organised sport, the nation scored badly on unstructured physical activity.

"The challenge for the modern family is finding a way to schedule time for kids to muck around and just be kids," he said.

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"So we're actually playing more sport than ever before but our kids are doing less physical activity, because all the mucking around time, all the time between structured activities that used to be spent chasing your mates around the neighbourhood or at the park with a bat and a tennis ball, or whatever it was, that's been largely replaced by entertainment and homework.

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Nature Play WA's chief executive Griffin Longley said while Australia did well in terms of engagement in organised sport, the nation scored badly on unstructured physical activity. "The challenge for the modern family is finding a way to schedule time for kids to muck around and just be kids," he said. "In the past sport was always an add-on to time spent mucking around. "So we're actually playing more sport than ever before but our kids are doing less physical activity, because all the mucking around time, all the time between structured activities that used to be spent chasing your mates around the neighbourhood or at the park with a bat and a tennis ball, or whatever it was, that's been largely replaced by entertainment and homework. "I think our lives are a lot more scheduled than they used to be, so it is a challenge, but what research is increasingly telling us is that unstructured mucking around time is more valuable than all those other activities."

Professor Leon Straker from the school of physiotherapy and exercise science at Curtin University agreed.

"As a parent myself I think, OK, I've signed my kid up to football, that's all they need, but in fact that is not enough," he said.

"They might do training once a week, and play on Saturdays, but that's only one or two bursts of activity in the week and we know that is not enough.

"They need to be doing an hour a day, so parents and schools need to be finding other ways of getting them moving."

Screen time has 'huge' impact on children's development.

The report card found that 80 per cent of Australians aged between 12 and 17 look at screens more than the recommended limit of two hours per day.

Professor Straker said the amount of time children spend watching television has not changed much in the past decade, from three hours a day in 1999 to just under that in 2009.

"But the amount of time they spend playing video games has risen rapidly from under 30 minutes a day a decade ago to between 30 minutes and 90 minutes daily," he said.

The impact of that on language acquisition, emotional development, the ability to take an idea and extrapolate on it and play with it...is huge (Griffin Longley).

He recently led a study to see whether "active" video games such as PlayStation Move and Wii, promoted by the gaming industry as a healthy alternative to more sedentary push-button games, actually got kids moving more and increased their fitness.

It found they did not.

"The world that kids live in now has really exciting things that are run by a computer, that can engage kids for hours and hours without them having to move," Professor Straker said.

Mr Longley said screen time has a huge impact on childhood development.

"It's not itself a negative thing, but when it's out of balance, it becomes a negative thing," he said.

"In a house where television was on two hours a day or screens for the same amount of time, the occupants of that house will speak 6,000 words combined to each other in a day.

"In a house where screens were on whenever anyone was home, the occupants of that house would speak 500 words combined.

"The impact of that on language acquisition, emotional development, the ability to take an idea and extrapolate on it and play with it ... is huge.

"We can talk a lot about the need to raise numeracy and literacy levels and to test more and more but the fundamental thing is kids having an opportunity to explore, discuss and imagine and to create and that happens in the home, in play and when human beings interact with each other.

"We've seen spikes in diagnosis of mental health disorders among children and the connection between increased screen time and the loss of social and emotional interaction is pretty clear."

Some schools restricting free play, others embracing it

Mr Longley said there was a growing number of schools who were creating spaces where kids can find some of that mucking around time.

"We had a real interesting call from a teacher in a western suburbs primary school about a year ago, asking for some direction about getting some good climbing structure for their school," he said.

"She was teaching young kids the very fundamentals of hand writing and she was finding that was virtually impossible for her because the majority of kids in her class lacked the core strength to sit up for long enough for the lesson.

"They weren't physical enough so she wanted to get them climbing so she could teach them to write."

Mr Longley said some schools were embracing nature play, while others were increasingly regulating what children can do at school. "The school that Shane Warne went to - its called Black Rock primary school - banned the use of balls before and after school a year ago," he said.

"There are examples of schools banning touch of any kind, banning cartwheels unless you've been trained by suitably qualified gymnastic instructors and supervised by that instructor.

"But on the other hand, there's a growing number of schools who are trying to reintroduce mucking around that does involve a little bit of risk. But people who look into it very quickly realize the risk of mucking around is really extremely low and the risk to children's health and wellbeing of not being able to muck around is quite high."

Mr Longley described a university study in New Zealand, where four primary schools did away with rules during playtime.

"One particular school essentially removed all the rules to a point where kids were allowed to climb trees, allowed to bring their skateboards to schools, allowed to play tackle games, build cubbies with sticks and the school has had a massive positive impact from it," he said.

"The rate of bullying has fallen to nothing and the teachers are reporting greater attention spans in the classroom, all sorts of positive impacts resulting from it."

Primary school uses crowdfunding for climbing dome

North Perth Primary School has launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise money to build a free-climb dome on its oval, and so far has raised three-quarters of their goal of \$40,000.

P&C representative Kirstyn Johnson said they were using traditional and online strategies to raise funds.

"We'd applied for and were knocked back twice in a row for the Education Department's playground equipment grant, so it was a case of, do we sit and do nothing while our kids have nothing to do or do we raise the money ourselves?" she asked.

"We are still doing the usual cake stalls and sausage sizzles, but those generally net a few thousand dollars at a time.

"We also wanted to involve the community in the project; the oval is on school grounds, but it is not fenced and the community accesses it after school hours, so all the kids in the neighbourhood can use it.

"It's been a lot of work but if it gets our kids playing more outside it will be worth it."

Mr Longley said he thought North Perth Primary School's crowd funding project was a great idea.

"I think it's hugely valuable and not just because of the money raised," he said.

"When people in that school community, their friends and extended friends put money towards that project, they're also expressing their support for it and they're tacitly giving their permission for the school to do that sort of stuff and for the kids to use it and play on it.

"One of the really interesting things is the impact of the loss of mucking around time is felt equally across socioeconomic and geographic divides.

"You'll have a kid in New Norcia having the same issues as a kid in New York, because often, depending on how the families choose to raise the child, they will very often be having a similar experience of childhood, playing the same games and even with each other online.

"There's a sort of homogenisation of childhood happening."

Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-15/australian-kids-not-playing-enough-finds-report/5892244>