

Author Advocates Free Play in USA Today

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By Nanci Hellmich

Make-believe is more than child's play. It's crucial to the development of creativity, empathy, learning and problem-solving, but it's being squeezed out of the lives of many children, says psychologist Susan Linn. In her new book, *The Case for Make Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World* (The New Press, \$24.95), Linn says parents must limit their children's screen time and give them simple tools that encourage creative play. USA TODAY talks to her about the building blocks of make-believe.

Q: Why is play essential to children's mental health and creativity?

A: Children use make-believe to conquer their fears and explore their hopes and dreams. It's in play that they get to initiate action instead of just constantly reacting. It's a safe haven for honest self-expression.

Q: How have you seen children use play to express themselves?

A: There was a little girl whose parents told her she was going to have a new sibling, so she slid off the couch, picked up a baby doll, whomped it on the floor a few times and hurled it across the room. Then she turned to her parents with a big grin and said cheerfully, "No more baby." She couldn't say, "I'm afraid I'm going to be replaced and you won't love me anymore." She didn't have the words to express the powerful feelings she was having, but she could play about it. She continued to play about babies through her mother's entire pregnancy. She diapered her doll babies. She literally walked in her mom's shoes and stuffed babies under her shirt to pretend to be pregnant. Children often play about what they are working on. For some children, that might be new babies, or sharing, or scary monsters. Others, with more challenging lives, may play about illness, death, loss or abuse.

Q: You write that studies show the time children spend in creative play has diminished over the years. Why?

A: Kids are spending about 40 hours a week engaged with electronic media after school. That's time taken away from creative play. The combination of this screen time and all the toys based on TV shows and movies narrows children's options for make-believe. So do these best-selling electronic toys where all you have to do is push a button, and the toy talks, walks and does back flips by itself. It's like the toy is having most of the fun, but it's not giving children a chance to be creative. When it comes to toys that encourage creative play, less is more. A good toy is 90% child and only 10% toy.

Q: How will the toys associated with some summer movies Indiana Jones, Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, The Dark Knight help or hinder play?

A: These very violent movies are spawning thousands of new toys and other licensed media-linked products. Kids play less creatively with media-linked toys. These toys come with a built-in script. There is a particular character with a particular history, and it does particular things. That's not conducive to creative play. I see this with little girls and the Disney princess movies. There are 40,000 Disney princess items on the market today. Girls see the movies again and again. And so when they play, they often just reiterate the movie instead of inventing something new or bringing something of themselves into it.

Q: What can parents do this summer to make sure their kids have an opportunity for creative play?

A: Make sure that children have unstructured time away from screen media and electronic toys. Take advantage of nice weather and get kids playing outside. Children actually play more creatively in nature. Play together as a family. Set up regular times when cellphones, computers, televisions, MP3 players are off and do something fun together â€” bake, play board games, do art projects or build with blocks. Fill the house with music â€” sing, dance, be silly. If your kids are going to camp or day care this summer, pick one that doesn't rely on showing movies or watching television and that encourages a variety of activities, including unstructured playtime.

Q: What kind of things should parents have available for children ages 3 to 7 that will encourage creative play?

A: Invest in art supplies, including paint, crayons, markers, glue, glitter. Give them dress-up clothes, puzzles, blocks, old sheets for pretend tents and caves, dolls that aren't sexualized, puppets and stuffed animals that don't have computer chips.

Q: Do adults remember the creative play from their childhoods?

A: People often tell me that their happiest memories are the times they spent in unstructured creative play by themselves or with friends. Don't today's children deserve a chance to play like that as well?