

How Free Play Can Define Kids' Success

Katrina Schwartz | February 15, 2013

Free, unstructured playtime gives kids a chance to discover their interests and tap into their creativity. It's a crucial element for building resilience in children, an attribute they'll need in order to become happy, productive adults. That's Kenneth Ginsburg's thesis and the core of his book [Building Resilience in Children and Teens](#).

Ginsburg, a pediatrician at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia who also works with homeless children, has spent a lot of time trying to help young people build tools they'll need to succeed — even when trauma has marred early lives.

But the word “success” can be loaded, often carrying different connotations. To Ginsburg, a successful child is one who finds something he loves to do, is generous, empathetic and compassionate, committed to repairing the world, shows grit and the ability to collaborate, creativity and can take constructive criticism. These are what will serve young people as they move into the world on their own.

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“So many of the things that we care about are completely learned through the creative process,” Ginsburg said at an event hosted by the [Bay Area Discovery Museum](#). When kids are allowed free time to play, they learn how to work in groups, negotiate, share, self-advocate, and make decisions.

Ginsburg cautions parents that putting too much pressure on children's academics might have negative effects in the long term. The way he frames parents' ultimate goals: Raise healthy, wise 35-year-olds. Parenting with long-term vision helps keep the little things in perspective.

“All the best ideas haven't been thought of yet. If you have people who are only thinking about fitting in the box, then you aren't going to get ideas outside the box,” Ginsburg said. Parents and educators shouldn't be trying to shape children into cogs for an economy that hasn't figured out what kind of machine it will be in 20 years.

Instead, one of the most important skills a parent can foster in children is resilience, which he says can be fostered through creativity. Ginsburg relies on the “[Seven C's of Resilience](#)” as a road map for helping students to find their inner grit.

7 C's of Resilience

1. **COMPETENCE:** Young people need to be recognized when they're doing something right and to be given opportunities to develop specific skills.

2. **CONFIDENCE:** Confidence comes from building real skills that parents and educators can teach and nurture. Confidence can be easily undermined, but also bolstered by tasks that push learners without making the goal feel unachievable.
3. **CONNECTION:** Being part of a community helps kids know they aren't alone if they struggle and that they can develop creative solutions to problems.
4. **CHARACTER.** Kids need an understanding of right and what wrong and the capacity to follow a moral compass. That will allow them see that they cannot be put down.
5. **CONTRIBUTION:** The experience of offering their own service makes it easier for young people to ask for help when they need it. Once kids understand how good it can feel to give to others, it becomes easier to ask for that same support when it's needed. And being willing to ask for help is a big part of being resilient.
6. **COPING:** Kids need to learn mechanisms to manage their stress by learning methods to both engage and disengage at times. Some strategies for doing this include breaking down seemingly insurmountable problems into smaller, achievable pieces, avoiding things that trigger extreme anxiety, and just letting some things go. After all, resilience is about conserving energy to fit the long game and kids need to know realistically what they can affect and what should be let go.
7. **CONTROL:** In order to truly be resilient a child need to believe that she has control over her world. Feeling secure helps engender control, which is why kids test limits.

Creativity plays an integral part of developing these seven skill sets. "Play is exactly about learning to control your environment, to figure things out," he said. "Play is integral to being able to build resilience." When kids play, they make mistakes and learn how to recover. It's also a unique time for parents to observe their children and offer gentle guidance about skill development or how to share.

Keeping children on rigid, academically driven schedules denies them the space for some of the real self-learning that will see them through unexpected challenges, the ones that aren't on the test.