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The Importance of Play, Recess, Mindfulness and Leadership

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on [October 22, 2017 8:00 AM](#) | [No comments](#)

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What will be the results from the shrinking childhood today's children are experiencing? We hope people will not passively wait and see what the lasting effects will be. We urge educators to begin considering this issue and make proactive decisions. Teachers of the early grades have found themselves responsible for more and more academics and increasingly numbers of schools have limited or eliminated recess as the academic press took hold. Recess and physical education were places where children made choices and let out energy which we argue helped them pay greater attention in the learning environment. Children are losing part of childhood. Play and school have become incompatible. The very experiences that contribute to physical health, emotional development and that build cooperation and teamwork have shrunk away. We also know that children are spending more time on screens and less outdoors.

According to [k12.com](#)

The average homework load for first- through third- graders has doubled over the past two decades, even though research shows homework doesn't benefit such young children. Indeed, some schools require preschoolers to tackle academic subjects like reading and writing.

They report that some parents in middle- and upper-income suburbs have objected to homework and other forms of what they view as academic pressure, including high-stakes testing. These parents have resisted the loss of playtime and the rise in stress.

In 2014 the American Psychological Association published the findings of their report entitled "American Psychological Association Survey Shows Teen Stress Rivals That of Adults". In it they reported:

Teens report that their stress level during the school year far exceeds what they believe to be healthy (5.8 versus 3.9 on a 10-point scale) and tops adults' average reported stress levels (5.8 for teens versus 5.1 for adults). Even during the summer -- between Aug. 3 and Aug. 31, 2013, when interviewing took place -- teens reported their stress during the past month at levels higher than what they believe is healthy (4.6 versus 3.9 on a 10-point scale). Many teens also report feeling overwhelmed (31 percent) and depressed or sad (30 percent) as a result of stress. More than one-third of teens report fatigue or feeling tired (36 percent) and nearly one-quarter of teens (23 percent) report skipping a meal due to stress.

Common sense and a plethora of research demands we think and act differently to stop the growing stressors on our children and we must learn how to help them deal with this environment more effectively. Remember academic stressors are not the only conditions aggravating the lives of children. Growing numbers of students are facing mental health challenges, live in families in transition, struggle with gender identities and preferences, poverty and bullying. All are stressors. There are some who believe we need more school psychologists and social workers. That may be true. Yet beyond the privacy of a conversation with professional, if these children return to the larger environment that contributes to the stress needing mediation, we have created a vicious cycle that cancels the help received.

School Environments Can Make a Difference

We cannot do anything about the state of families or the world. But we can do something about the school environment. We cannot make a difference in the socio-economic level of the families we serve. We cannot improve the troubles that wait for the children when they go home. We can commit, however, to building a school environment that is child focused, based upon developmental needs, and responsive to individual challenges.

For the little ones, of course, there needs to be time for play, exploration, running, and singing. They need active interactions with their peers and interventions from their teachers when indicated. Common sense. We celebrate those leaders who have stepped up and protected

playtime. It is essential for developing children. But, there are other actions that can be taken as well.

Over a million students have been trained in mindfulness, world-wide, by just one of the organizations dedicated to sharing the tool; Mindfulschools.org. These programs teach students to mediate emotions and lower stress helping them and their teachers become learning ready.



Leaders Can Make a Difference

We think more can be done. It seems unthinkable that we spend time developing ways to reduce stress while not changing an environment that contributes to it. Leaders can make the difference by opening ongoing conversations with teachers, psychologists, and social workers about how to maintain the academic standards that drive each day while taking special care to make the environment one in which children, no matter their lives outside of school, have the opportunity and support to flourish as learners, and as young people. Questions can begin the conversation.

- How does our learning environment allow for students to learn and grow in all dimensions of their lives?
- In what ways does the way we do business interfere with the possibilities for success for our students?
- What do we need to do moving forward that will help us move from where we are to where we would like to be?

Ann Myers and Jill Berkowicz are the authors of *The STEM Shift (2015, Corwin)* a book about leading the shift into 21st century schools. Ann and Jill welcome connecting through [Twitter](#) & [Email](#).

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