

insights

Peer time counts big time towards your child's success

by Michael Grose



“It takes a village to raise a child because in a village there are always enough kids to form a play group.” Anon

Life for children and teenagers is generally very busy and adult-initiated. A quick glance at most kids' after school schedules will reveal at least two after school activities (involving sport/ physical activity or classes of some sort) each week that are organised and lead by an adult. Nothing wrong with that however the more time children spend in adult-initiated activities the less free time they have to spend among themselves, and the enormous benefits this brings.

Spending free time with peers benefits kids in these ways:

1. They learn to negotiate and communicate

Young children generally communicate with one another through play, and the communications have real meaning. They negotiate about what and how to play. Typically kids will make up the rules of any game, modifying them as they go along, and challenging other children's interpretations. *“You're not playing by the rules”* is a common childhood retort most of us are familiar with. Left to their own devices kids will generally resolve such conflict situations more creatively, and with more finality than when adults become involved.

Teenage peer-to-peer communications often focus on emotions and the struggles they experience. Adolescents learn they can be honest with their friends, as they are less likely to overreact and assume control, the way that their parents or other adults might.

2. They become independent quicker

When children spend more time among themselves they become less reliant on adults to solve problems for them. In fact, when kids play among themselves someone will take on the authority of an adult and ensure that problems are resolved, usually more quickly and more equitably than when an adults attempts to do so.

Typically when kids of any age get together they act in ways that can mock and challenge adulthood – young children will use 'naughty' words and teenagers push parent boundaries so they can gather together away from adults. This type of independence-seeking is the default mechanism of kids of all ages, but it can be stifled by well-meaning, over-involved or over-controlling adults.

3. They are less anxious

“I dare you” is a phrase that evokes strong memories for many adults. It's a throw-back to a time when as children or teenagers we challenged each other to climb that tree, to cross that road and to go speak to that girl/boy. Of course, the biggest challenge we faced was to confront our fears rather than avoid them. Children of any

generation tend to be more courageous, and better able to learn to manage difficult emotions such as fear, nervousness and anxiousness when they spend more time with each other, away from adults.

4. They become more innovative

Adults of every generation bemoan the fact that children and teens don't play in the same way as they did when they were young. We forget that children are naturally drawn to the newest innovations in the larger culture around them. Where adults are naturally suspicious of change, children will invariably embrace it. This is shown by children's eagerness to embrace digital technology, which is often far ahead of their parents and teachers. Children's culture focuses, quite naturally and adaptively, on the skills important to the world they are growing into, not the world as it was, when their parents and teachers were growing up.

5. They get along better with others

The biggest requirement for kids mixing with siblings and peers is that they must get along with each other. They need to accept each other's differences; learn how to assert themselves while accommodating the needs of others and respect other kids' opinions, not just their own. This type of socialisation is central to being a member of civil society. The skills of "getting along" are best practised among equals and for kids that means practising on their peers and siblings. These "getting along" skills may well be the most important skills for kids to develop if they are to lead a successful adult life –including maintaining long-term partnerships, making friends and enjoying cooperative relationships in the workplace.

Encourage a culture of childhood

As a parent or teacher it helps to see the time kids spend among friends and siblings as valuable rather than wasted time. Encourage kids to spend time with each other and resist the urge to rush in fix things up between peers and siblings when relationships sour or they have problems to resolve. And resist the natural urge of most parents who lead small families to know everything that's happening in a child's life -kids need some time and space to work things out themselves.



Kids need to belong to two cultures

Encouraging a culture of childhood doesn't mean that we devalue what we offer as adults to children and young people. Kids also need to be able to fit into the adult culture that we are preparing them for. However it's important to recognise the value of sibling and peer relationships in the development of the skills and attitudes needed for a successful adult life.



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