

# Learning is child's play

26 September  
2019

A focus on learning through play is the pathway to happier children and stronger educational outcomes.

While living in the United States, Finnish educationalist Dr

Pasi Sahlberg was surprised when a colleague suggested that his then two-year old child's behaviour showed signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). "We don't call it that in Finland," says Sahlberg. "We call it childhood.

"The work of childhood is 'play,'" he says. In Finland, this translates as outdoor, unstructured play, staying close to nature and avoiding screens. All preschool and early years schooling is play-based, aiming to teach children: What is learning and why do we need to do that?

Formal schooling begins at age seven and children play outdoors for 15 minutes after each 45 minutes of class, no matter the weather, throughout their primary years. School days are shorter, too.

"The first year of primary school in Finland is still a very soft landing," says Sahlberg. "It's much more about helping children understand why they go to school." As a result, most Finnish children take responsibility for their own learning in school, he says. "They learn that education is something you do for yourself, so that you make the best out of your own life."

**Evidence uncovered**



In his new book *Let the Children Play* (<https://pasisahlberg.com/news/next-book-let-the-children-play/>), authored with William Doyle, the pair criticise a “global education reform movement”, or GERM, that pushes policies of early learning and testing into schools, and has the unintended consequence of depriving children of play.

“There is no evidence that earlier academic instruction and learning has any benefits for children,” says Sahlberg.

But he says there is overwhelming evidence about the importance of play. “That’s one of the single most important findings we made during our research.” Paediatricians around the world, and particularly in the US, are hugely concerned about children’s deteriorating physical and mental health.

“Play is the prevention of many of the problematic symptoms we see now in our children and a remedy for stress, depression and anxiety, which are often made worse by school,” he says.

Sahlberg does not directly link the loss of play with the epidemic of ADHD diagnoses. “I think it is more complicated than that,” he says. “But we do argue that play — especially that highest order, unstructured outdoor play — can help prevent some of those things that could lead to ADHD symptoms.

“We now know what helps children succeed in their lives and in their learning,” he says. “It’s play.”

### **Play aids success**

Play is not a trivial or aimless waste of time, Sahlberg and Doyle write, but “systematic exploration, experimentation and discovery,” or SEED.

Unstructured activities, or fewer structured activities, build a stronger executive function, which means stronger attention and impulse control, emotional regulation and decision-making. “It is the ultimate 21st century skills booster,” they write.

In the age of the internet search, children need the complex human skills of critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, people management and social skills. These skills come from learning and collaborating, negotiating and failing, all of which take place in play.

Sahlberg says there is global consensus about play. In the US, China, Singapore, Japan and Australia, schools are taking part in Great Play Experiments. Singapore is remodelling the early learning and testing education system that gave it remarkable academic achievements in test scores because it has too high a social cost, he says. “They want people who are healthy and happy and able to create new ideas, and

## More activities

Sahlberg hopes the new book will start conversations. "Let's ask, for example: What's good for children. What is their natural way of learning when they are six, eight or eleven years old?"

"For young children, the most natural way is not to spend six or seven hours every day in the school building being told almost all the time what to do."

Let the Children Play includes an action list to increase play at school. "The most potential is where teachers and parents work collectively," says Sahlberg. "One idea is to design an experiment in your own school that involves learning through play, and free, outdoor play. How does it change the outcomes and experiences of the kids? If it's good, then you can make a change.

"School can be a place of joy for students, their most favourite place," Sahlberg says.

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This article originally appeared in the *Australian Educator Spring 2019* ([https://www.aeufederal.org.au/download\\_file/view/1699/2579](https://www.aeufederal.org.au/download_file/view/1699/2579)).