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## Research that Matters column (April 2022)

### *Building a better world is kids' play*

*By Jim Meek*

For a minute, let me be one more old guy mis-remembering the days of his youth...

My summers in the early 1960s were essentially parentless. In my family, kids older than nine or so were told to go outside to play. And stay out.

My friends and I spent our time playing pickup ball, jumping backyard fences, telling each other lies, and cycling dangerously along the narrow sandy paths bordering a less iconic Thames River in a less exotic London – the one in Ontario.

Dr. Michelle Stone figures kids could use more of that sort of thing – unstructured goofing-off time – in what we all hope is a post-pandemic period.

An Associate Professor of Kinesiology at Dalhousie University, Stone says amazing things happen when children are allowed to indulge in what she calls “loose parts play.”

Her research project involved preschoolers from 19 child care centres across Nova Scotia, who were given opportunities to play outside with random items – “loose parts” - including wooden planks, rope and pulleys, hose tubes, funnels, buckets, tires, balls, milk crates and tarp.

The three-to-five-year-olds in the project did what kids do when you “get out of the way and let them play”. They built creative structures. They climbed, balanced, took risks, problem-solved and made decisions. They became more determined and resilient. Overall, they learned what Stone calls “physical literacy”, which can be loosely defined as learning how to move your body in many ways, and developing the confidence, knowledge and understanding to be active for life.

Stone says physical literacy is key to establishing healthy, lifelong, physical activity habits. Unsupervised play is key too – kids learn how to get along, how to manage their emotions, how to fall and get back up, how to fail and try again. Some shy children in the program came out of their shells. At play, immigrant children with other mother tongues rapidly improved their English language skills.

Where's this all going?

As it was for Shakespeare, so it is for Stone – “play’s the thing.” Without play, the physical, mental, social and emotional health of children is compromised. Child-directed play is critical for achieving development milestones. It enhances physical skills like running, hopping and balancing. It’s essential for developing socio-emotional skills such as empathy and relationship skills. And it’s critical for cognitive development.

Dr. Alexa Bagnell, Chief of Psychiatry at the IWK Health Center and Professor of Psychiatry at Dalhousie University, shares Stone’s concerns about childhood and youth health.

In her practice, Bagnell cares for children and young people who have trouble finding their way in life. When Bagnell’s kids fall down, they sometimes need a hand to get up.

In many ways, she says, the pandemic undermined the mental health of children, youth and families. Many children lost what Bagnell calls the “ready-made coping tools” a school routine can provide – getting out of bed, catching the bus, going to classes, and playing sports or video games with friends after school.

Still, something good may have come of COVID-19 in the delivery of youth mental health care in Nova Scotia. “I wouldn’t wish another pandemic on anyone,” she said. But when it came to the use of technology in health care, “we moved light years overnight.”

Here’s what happened two years ago.

After the first outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in a widespread lockdown, Bagnell and her colleagues realized they had to put digital care in place in a hurry. Sclerotic health bureaucracies - at the IWK, at the Nova Scotia Health Authority, at the Department of Health and Wellness – turned nimble overnight.

In the face of a clear and present danger, clinicians and physicians were allowed to take their computers home and set up a home office and offer virtual treatment. “Within a week or two,” online appointments became the norm. Donors lined up to provide iPads and other technology tools so that kids with no digital connectivity at home could hook up with caregivers.

In short, mental health care providers showed the kind of resilience in a crisis that Michelle Stone’s daycare children displayed in the fields of play.

Two years later, Zoom and its sister apps routinely connect IWK psychiatrists and clinicians with patients, parents, and other caregivers located elsewhere. Sometimes, this works great for kids who aren’t comfortable trudging into a clinic. Sometimes, children and youth need facetime with their caregivers. Either way, Bagnell says COVID-19 has left her team better equipped to help patients than it was 24 months ago.

Good thing too: Nurturing the mental and physical health of children is crucial for them - and for the planet. As Bagnell puts it, "Youth are 25 per cent of our population, but they're 100 per cent of our future."

*Research That Matters is written by Jim Meek, Public Affairs Atlantic, on behalf of the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU) [info@atlanticuniversities.ca](mailto:info@atlanticuniversities.ca).*

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