It Is A Sad Day When Pediatricians Need To Prescribe ‘Play Time’

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — August 22, 2018

As a society, are we losing our grasp for the obvious and the most basic, fundamental understanding of how to nurture the next generation and each other? Is this the ultimate price we are paying for our high-paced, tech-focused, consumer-driven modern culture?

Apparently, after a recent spate of common sense formal legislation on allowing, under appropriate conditions (e.g. age, maturity), a prepared child to walk to school or official guidelines being issued about not shaming women who bottle feed by respecting their choice for their baby, the latest by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) solidifies that our culture is in crisis. With the publication of their report on the power of play, among their recommendations is for pediatricians to write a “prescription for play” at every single well-visit for the child in his first two years of life.

This concept, in itself, reflects a sad state of affairs.

With the litany of recent examples along with the new wave of conflict avoidance being supplanted by instantaneous escalating behavior of calling police as a first step to “tattle” on kids running lemonade stands, community erosion and our current propensity toward electronic-device-assisted out-of-context “gotcha” videos is enabling adults to disregard engaging in the age-old standard practice of parent-to-parent conversations to resolve disputes, diffuse the situation and thereby demonstrate problem-solving their child could then learn to model.

Due to the daily coarsening of civil discourse on social media, routine conflict resolution has gone out the window and this new path of immediate escalation through direct contact with third party authority has replaced a once very desirable trait. What formerly was pretty standard in
communities, an adult speaking to the child’s parent about their concerns, has all but evaporated in our culture. This is not good news.

A preoccupation with stuff and things will never replace involved parenting. No class or trend in high demand is an effective substitute. Electronic babysitters (e.g. iPads, smartphones) used excessively or over-scheduling rob a child of fostering adaptability, creativity, and generating a capacity to find peace and comfort in the stillness which supports their development of resilience. Parenting well is about the long game and being able to step back and see the big picture. In those unexpected and particularly challenging moments, parental actions that most encourage laying the groundwork to create a future well-adjusted, independent adult who can exhibit self-reliance, face and overcome difficulties as well as experience joy pay the greatest dividends.

I recently wrote about a wise guiding principle that could inform humans through study of the mating habits of armadillos. They delay implantation of their fertilized egg, sometimes up to four months, so that they might protect their offspring. This selective delayed gratification serves to ensure their progeny are born at a time of plenty, thus optimizing their survival.

Creating favorable environments help children and families flourish. The parent child dyad is a symbiotic one. For a child to learn accountability and responsibility from a parent, he will mimic what he sees. Leading by example and being consistent in demonstrating that actions have consequences will be of far greater benefit to that child in adulthood than most short-term distractions. These types of gifts to a child withstand a lifetime. Playing with a parent, guardian or alone in an unstructured way is not to be overrated in its lessons or positive effects. Yes, stuff and things are fun and have their place, but don’t underestimate how much is gained for a child when he knows he is loved, is empowered to solve his own problems and view the world through a lens of opportunities not obstacles.

Being at a point where the AAP has to state publicly to preschools and parents that “play is not frivolous,” should be a societal wake-up call. Rigidity of schedule can prompt rigidity of thought and nominal gains. We know that adverse childhood experiences and the toxic sustained stress they pose, when continued unchecked, impair kids mental, even physical, health into adulthood. And, under such conditions, once adulthood is reached the problems spread beyond the family. For our nation’s children to be prepared for adult good health and success, it is time we get back to understanding the basics and not get so distracted by the bells and whistles of our enticing culture. Some selective delayed gratification would serve us well as the negative chain reaction forged by the alternative only spirals future generations, increases overall health care burdens and simply misses the mark for optimal biopsychosocial development.

A healthy parent-child relationship is essential to both parties’ well-being. It is a major red flag if barriers of modern-day living are designing too myopic a lens for this to be universally realized.