

# Parents, Get Messy! Your Kids Will Thank You Later



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — November 16, 2018



A Facebook memory popped up with the picture accompanying this article. The act alone changed my entire mood, filling it with laughter and warming my heart. That picture was taken the day I returned to work after a vacation. An actual vacation, in fact, which was a rarity for me in medical practice. Not one of those “oh no, if you don’t take off a few days next week, then you will lose the vacation” which was my pattern. Because it was a real one where I actually went somewhere, it’s probably why I look rested and am giddy despite having had an exploding poop from an infant land down my coat and onto my legs and shoes.

You see, I knew better. Being an infant and child whisperer is my zone. I know never to hold a disrobed infant not even for a moment without positional protection regardless of echoes from parents that he just went so won’t go again.

But, the first day back to the office was always nuts. No matter how hard I would try and advise about a gentle ease with respect to booking my schedule, human nature took hold. That’s the beauty of the doctor-patient relationship and how special it can be for all involved, especially in pediatrics. People are very loyal and will hold off seeing anyone else. So, with an especially packed schedule I was asked to take another photo with a baby.

The kicker is these requests were often retakes since I, as a quasi-grown up with a childlike spirit can handle taking a photo and following instructions, the babies tended to be a bit less cooperative. So, getting their best angle is an actual thing.

Rushing through the day, we sometimes acquiesce to keep things moving despite our gut telling us this is probably not a good idea. Of course, that’s when fecal eruptions happen. When we throw precautionary measures to the wind.

Oh, but the joy the laughter brings reverberates so many years into the future. Especially when

reflecting on the multiple bouquets of flowers such events precipitated with sentiments in cards like “here’s hoping this is the last time he \*\$#@% on a beautiful, intelligent woman.” The communal joy was omnipresent as families would join in on the sheer ridiculousness of it amplifying the underlying truth, parenting is a wondrous often messy ride. If I couldn’t stop laughing while running out of the exam room and down the hall to stop the evolution of things, then how could they not?

That’s a fun day at the pediatrician’s office. It’s the story that spreads through the office and back to loved ones when later detailing the events of the day. It has a ripple effect.

The permutations are infinite from walking into exam rooms where toddlers have vomited and had diarrhea on their parent. Granted those bring some delayed humanity given the first priority is assuaging the child’s discomfort and managing their illness while preventing spread of infections. But, even still, they are the good stuff. The grand equalizer and humbler among parents and families.

We live in a time where all messes are pathologized, requiring sanitation (read [here](#) [1]). But, it is these moments that leave a lasting imprint on the child that he or she is loved, cared for and learn their greatest skills of coping and resilience. The frenzied moments getting off to school or between activities where food spills and unexpected traffic alter plans. It’s the moments surrounding the doctor’s visit or waiting for it that embed in memory.

We have become so chaos-averse that the preoccupation with all-cause avoidance has led to a drastic swing of the pendulum to overscheduled, overplanned, excessively anxiety-provoking baselines. And, the impact of that is profound. Raising a child to be an independent adult with a capacity to rebound and be adaptable as life’s turmoils and joys ebb and flow. Our high-paced, tech-focused, consumer-driven modern culture is eroding the most basic foundation required to nurture the next generation and each other.

As a result of realizing we are paying the ultimate price, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) felt compelled to publish [their report on the power of play](#) [2], 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. (See [here](#) [3] for more in-depth discussion on the topic). Industry followed. Consider Jell-O’s [edible slime](#) [4]. They are marketing their line to “mold it. Shape it. Build it into whatever you and your kids’ imagination can bring to life. What will you discover with #JELLOPLAY? #KIDSFREEPLAY.”

Obviously, there is a time and place for schedules and structure. And their value is immense in a child’s development as are infection control measures. That said, being able to find comfort and peace in the stillness and constructively occupy your mind no matter the circumstance are also invaluable skills to hone that will serve you well over your entire lifetime. Throwing some food and being absurd pay tremendous dividends in family growth, bonding, health and well-being - contributing to a child’s sense of belonging, self-worth and confidence.

An overemphasis on preventing and equating all “bad” things no matter the nuance can do us a grave disservice if we aren’t paying attention. Marginalizing joy is a hefty detriment to maintaining a successful, healthy and happy life. Finding comfort in ambiguity is a necessary step, especially when situations are outside of our control.

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[1] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/10/19/sanitizing-childhood-adversity-chips-away-resilience-13534>

[2] <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2018/08/16/peds.2018-2058.full.pdf>

[3] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/08/22/it-sad-day-when-pediatricians-need-prescribe-%E2%80%99play-time%E2%80%99-13345>

[4] <https://twitter.com/JELLOPlay>