

# Free Play, Organized Sports and Human Development

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**Abstract – The article briefly outlines the importance of unstructured free play and organized sports in human development. The article makes a distinction between free play and organized sports and the human developmental challenges that they cater to and the benefits of following a sequence in enhancing child development. The article also explores the physical, social and emotional benefits of play and organized sports and how it can lead to holistic development of an individual. Last but not the least the article stresses on the importance of broadening the current spaced available for sports in our curriculum.**

**Key words: Free Play, Organized Sports, Development, Adolescent, Childhood.**

## INTRODUCTION

As the old saying goes ‘all work and no play makes Johnny a dull boy’, it is an age old knowledge that play and sports is vital to human mind. Organized sports are as old as human civilization itself. It is apparent from many carvings on monument to excavation of archeological sites that sports have always been a part of the human society. Sports have served not only an entertainment and leisure value but also important educational and social value to humans. However with the ushering in of the digital era, sports seems to sometimes taken a back seat in our educational curriculum and consequently in the lives and individuals who graduate out of such education system. It is especially a challenge to today’s educationalists, psychologists and public health experts who work in a society with increased incidence of cognitive issues, mental health issues and obesity. Also the commercialization of education and curriculum has made education less holistic and inclusive of all aspects of human development. Thus there is greater need today for the review and re-inclusion of play and sports as part of child’s life. In this context, this article further explores the psychological and development benefits of unstructured free play during childhood and organized sports during adolescence.

## IMPORTANCE OF UNSTRUCTURED FREE PLAY AND CHILDHOOD

“Play is the work of a child” said Dr. Maria Montessori, the famous Italian educationalist who revolutionized education. What seems like play to an adult is learning through effortless imitation and practice for a child.

Play is such an import and integral part of childhood that the united national commission for human rights recognized the importance of play by declaring leisure, play and recreational activities as the basic right of every child (1). It is important to understand that free play is different from organized sports. Children are below the age of 12 years are not fully developmentally ready for rigorous training in organized sports (3). It is important for children to involve in free play for the simple pleasure that is derived from it before graduating to organized sports.

Bob Hughes (9), a leading play theorist describes free play as behavior which is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated, i.e. performed for no external goal or reward. Unstructured free play comes naturally to every human child. The various stage of physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of a child is marked by changing and constantly evolving patterns of free play. In the first few years of life the child’s physical development is centered on strengthening nervous system, developing different groups of muscles and improving dexterity. The psychological development is centered on exploration of the physical world, development and sharpening of senses, developing creativity and imagination. It also includes engaging with people around them in a positive way, taking turns during play, evolving a sense of fairness during play and rudimentary understanding that any play situation is bound by certain rules.

The unstructured free play offers children an opportunity to experiment and test their capabilities, work in groups, manage conflicts and negotiate with other children. All of the above lay a strong foundation to the developing personality of the child and

contributes to the future participation in organized sports. In other words the necessary skills required for the successes in organized sports are picked up by a child during his initial years of free unstructured play. Studies conducted by Dr. Jean cote (2), professor of physical and health education at Queen's university shows that successful athletes, during their childhood involved in many different types of games that were unstructured and casual, organized as fun games by children themselves with least adult interference. The researcher goes on to suggest that excessive adult supervision and training of children up to the age of 12 can lead to dropout. It is important for children to have fun while they play the sport so that they love the sport for its 'fun' value laying a firm foundation for serious sports training in future and consequent success. (3)

On the contrary Foster and Jacob (4), in their study on play deprivation and juvenile violence concluded that violent crimes committed by children are a result of play deprivation. In a recent study of one to two year old children in 'maltreating' families Valentino et al (5) found that children in such families displayed less child-initiated play and less socially competent behavior than children of the same age in non-maltreating families

Thus it can be said that the developmental trajectory of children is best supplemented by free, unstructured play which is played for simple childhood pleasure with non-interference from adults. Ideally the early and middle childhood (between the age of 3 to 11) should be a time for explorative self-organized free play with very less or no component of formal training. Formal training should ideally begin during adolescence which starts by the age of 12 years.

## ORGANIZED SPORTS AND ADOLESCENCE DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence is an intense, turbulent and decisive phase of human life. It is a phase of intense growth and change in all areas of development. Mastering new challenges, building one's behavioral repertoire and successful completion of adolescent phase is crucial to healthy adulthood. It is truly a turning point in human development where one has to build 'life skills' essential for attaining independent living. Thus an important challenge of adolescence is to build skills such as communication, conflict management, negotiation, team work, confidence, self-esteem, self-control, character building, ability to face and overcome lose, have a balanced response to failure and success and a sense of overall wellbeing. Organized sports by design nurture and enhance all these essential qualities. Needless to mention that organized sports also helps in weight control, hormonal balance, and reproductive health and enhanced physical growth.

Organized sports provide necessary opportunity for an adolescent to master essential life skills by building their emotional intelligence. First utilized by the business world, 'emotional intelligence' is finding its way into sports psychology too with research concentrating on the mutual relationship between emotional intelligence and success in sports. Emotional intelligence can be defined as the ability to identify, assess and manage one's own emotions, emotions of others and that of the group and handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically (7). Though the relationship between both needs to be conclusively established by research, it can be said that sports contribute to the development of necessary skills and values needed to succeed in education, work and life. There is growing evidence of this. In a study on the effects of sports on young adolescent's emotional wellbeing, Donaldson and Ronan (6) found that increased levels of sports participation had a positive effect on emotional and behavior wellbeing particular self-concept. The study also showed that adolescent who involved in sports reported fewer behavior problems than their counterparts. In a literature review conducted by Rasberry et.al. (7) it was found that more than 50% of all associations examined between physical activity and academic performance were positive. One of the conclusions of the study was that psychical activity and academic performance are positively related.

Such researches can provide a pointer to the policy makers in the field of education. It is important to include, expand and increase the hours provided to organized sports in school and college curriculum. Play and sports can also be utilized as an excellent opportunity to teach life skills to children and adolescents. Last but not the least a broader space for sports is also necessary for better mental health of children and adolescent.

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