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To Really Learn, Our Children Need the Power of Play

The U.S. can learn a big lesson from Finland's education system: Instead of stress and standardized testing, schools should focus on well-being and joy

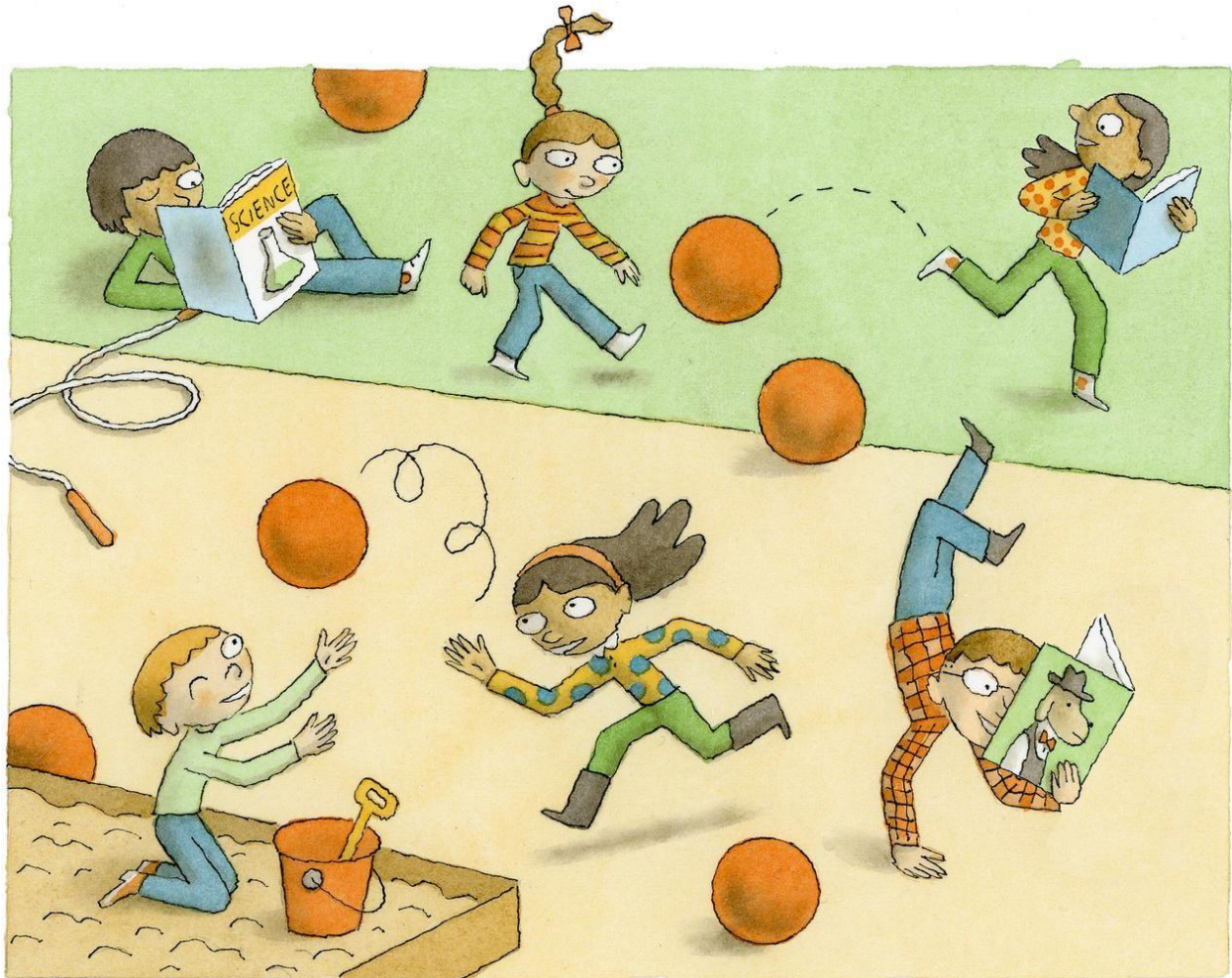


Illustration: Greg Clarke

By Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle

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Five years ago, we switched countries.

Pasi Sahlberg came to the U.S. as a visiting professor at Harvard University, and William Doyle moved to Finland to study its world-renowned school system as a Fulbright scholar. We brought our families with us. And we were stunned by what we experienced.

In Cambridge, Mass., Pasi took his young son to have a look at a potential preschool. The school's director asked for a detailed assessment of the boy's vocabulary and numeracy skills.

"Why do you need to know this? He is barely 3 years old!" Pasi asked, looking at his son, for whom toilet training and breast-feeding were recent memories.

"We need to be sure he is ready for our program," replied the director. "We need to know if he can keep up with the rest of the group. We need to make sure all children are prepared to make the mark."

Pasi was flummoxed by the bizarre education concept of "preschool readiness." Compounding the culture shock was the stunning price tag: \$25,000 a year for preschool, compared with the basically free, government-funded daycare-through-university programs that the boy would have enjoyed back in Finland.

Pasi had entered an American school culture that is increasingly rooted in childhood stress and the elimination of the arts, physical activity and play—all to make room for a tidal wave of test prep and standardized testing. This new culture was supposed to reduce achievement gaps, improve learning and raise America's position in the international education rankings. Nearly two decades and tens of billions of dollars later, it isn't working. Yet the boondoggle continues, even as the incidence of childhood mental-health disorders such as anxiety and depression is increasing.

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Meanwhile, in Finland, William Doyle entered the school system ranked as #1 in the world for childhood education by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Economic Forum and Unicef—a system built in large part on research pioneered (and increasingly ignored) in the U.S. Rather than pursuing standardized-test data as the Holy Grail of education, Finland focuses on equity, happiness, well-being and joy in learning as the foundations of education.

Finnish parents and teachers widely agree on several mantras rarely heard in U.S. schools: "Let children be children" and "The work of a child is to play." A Finnish mother told William, "Here, you're not considered a good parent unless you give your child lots of outdoor play."

Finnish children learn to take responsibility and manage risks at very young ages, in school and out. Following local customs, William's 7-year-old son learned to walk to school by himself, across six street crossings and two busy main roads. One day, on a forest path, William came upon a delighted Finnish father applauding his 6-year-old daughter as she scrambled up a tall tree—to a height that would have petrified many parents around the world. "If she falls and breaks her arm, it will be in a good cause. She will have learned something," the father said nonchalantly.

In Finland, William experienced an education culture that protects and cherishes childhood, one in which students are immersed in a play-rich education that goes all the way to high school. At his son's school, William saw children rush to the cafeteria in stocking feet, giggling, hugging and practicing dance steps. Students got a 15-minute outdoor recess every single hour of the school day, rain or shine.

"There are many reasons children must play in school," explained the school's principal, Heikki Happonen. "When they are moving, their brains work better. Then they concentrate more in class. It's very important in social ways too." He added, "School should be a child's favorite place."

The cultural shift is profound. Instead of annual, high-stakes standardized tests, Finnish children are assessed all day, every day, by a much more accurate instrument: trusted teachers who are selected, trained and respected as elite professionals.

Finland has a crucial insight to teach the U.S. and the world—one that can boost grades and learning for all students, as well as their social growth, emotional development, health, well-being and happiness. It can be boiled down to a single phrase: Let children play.

Back in the U.S., that idea has a powerful champion: the American Academy of Pediatrics, which has a membership of 67,000 doctors. "The importance of playful learning for children cannot be overemphasized," declared the academy's 2018 clinical report ["The Power of Play."](#)

According to the doctors, play—including recess, playful teaching and discovery, as well as periods of self-directed intellectual and physical activity by children with minimal direct interference by adults—boosts mental and physical health, develops executive function and offers "the ideal educational and developmental milieu for children." That is particularly true for children in poverty, who can be acutely deprived of opportunities for play inside school and out.

A new emphasis on play can be seen cutting across cultures and ideologies. In China, an experiment in outdoor-play-based preschool and kindergarten known as Anji Play is proving so successful in more than 100 rural schools that it is being expanded—and widely hailed as a national model for early childhood education. In Singapore, education officials are trying to shift a nation of high achievers away from stress, academic ranking and over-testing toward a new vision of childhood exploration and "purposeful play." In a 2018 speech, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung said, "There is room for parents to step back, give children space to explore and play."

'The lifelong success of children is based on their ability to be creative and to apply the lessons learned from playing.'

—*American Academy of Pediatrics*

Meanwhile, in school districts in Texas, Oklahoma, South Carolina and New York, tens of thousands of children are being given up to 60 minutes of daily outdoor, free-play recess. These

experiments are directly inspired by Finland's schools—and educators are reporting sharp improvements in academic performance, concentration and behavior.

Our own children now attend public schools in two great global cities, New York and Sydney, Australia. In both cities and countries, play is an endangered or nonexistent component of education—even though the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that “the lifelong success of children is based on their ability to be creative and to apply the lessons learned from playing.”

We should take a lesson from Finland, follow doctors' orders and build our schools, homes and communities on the learning language of children: play.

—This essay is adapted from the authors' new book, “Let the Children Play: How More Play Will Save Our Schools and Help Children Thrive” (Oxford University Press). Mr. Sahlberg is a professor of education policy at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, and a former director-general at Finland's Ministry of Education. Mr. Doyle is a scholar in residence at the University of Eastern Finland.