Societal changes, children's play, and children's mental health

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International Day of Play, on June 11, 2025, prompts us to consider the relationship between young people's opportunities for play and their mental health. Play is intrinsically motivated activity initiated and directed by the players themselves (appendix p 2). Play is a fundamental human drive, an expression of freedom, a source of creativity, and a vehicle of learning that enriches the lives of people of all ages. For children especially, play is a prime source of happiness. Moreover, play and other independent activities are the vehicles through which children practice taking charge of their own activities, solving their own problems, and dealing with adversity. Through play, children develop traits such as responsibility, agency, and courage, which allow them to face life's trials with equanimity. Research has shown that children and young adults who engaged in more play and other independent activity in childhood feel better about their lives and, by various measures, are doing better than those who engaged in less play.[1] History shows that societal changes that reduce children's (including adolescents') opportunities for play negatively affect young people's mental health. This Comment reflects on three eras of change in children's opportunities for play and other independent activity, and their mental-health consequences.

Between 1950 and 1990, children's opportunities to engage in independent activities, including play, declined continuously. Reasons for this decline include increased time at school and school homework, prioritisation of out-of-school adult-directed activities (eg, sports), increased fears of dangers to children when not guarded by adults, and reduced acceptance of children in public spaces (appendix p 2).[2] Over this 40-year period, large, continuous declines in mental wellbeing in school-aged children, especially adolescents, were documented in the USA, UK, and many other North American and European nations by standard assessments of anxiety and depression and by suicide rates (appendix p 3).[2] Correlation does not prove causation, but much evidence points to the gradual decline in children's independent play and exploration as being a major contributor to the worsening of young people's mental health.[1]

Following this decline, adolescent mental health improved in the USA, UK, and various other countries between 1990 and 2010—a change that has largely been ignored in mental-health literature. Evidence for this improvement comes from many sources. As an example, between 1990 and 2010, the suicide rate per 100 000 young people aged 15–19 years declined from about 11·0 to about 7·5 in the USA, and from about 6·2 to about 3·0 in England and Wales (appendix p 3). This reduction in suicide rates corresponds with the computer revolution, which is arguably a contributor to the improvement in young people's mental health at this time (appendix pp 4–5). Most families with adolescents in North America and western Europe had a home computer by the early 1990s and an internet connection by the mid-1990s and, in most families, adolescents were the primary early users of these new technologies.[3] From 1990 onwards, computer games became increasingly exciting and, with the internet, increasingly social; chatrooms and emerging social media applications enabled young people to interact, play verbally, and share experiences with friends—activities that had become increasingly difficult in the physical world.[3,4] Computer play is real play, and online socialisation is real socialisation.[5] Research has shown that the most popular computer games are those that involve creativity, mental challenge, and (for multiplayer games) social skills.[6] The computer and internet allowed adolescents to regain at least some of the autonomy, sense of competence, and social connectedness that are essential for mental wellbeing.

From 2010 onwards, adolescent mental health began to deteriorate again in the USA and UK, but not in most of Europe. Between 2010 and 2019, suicide rates per 100 000 young people aged 15–19 years increased from about 7·5 to about 11·0 in the USA, and from about 3·0 to about 6·0 in the UK (appendix p 3). A popular theory for worsening adolescent mental health attributes the decline to the increased use of smartphones and social media; however, a similar decline was not observed in many other countries with increased smartphone and social media use among young people. Although suicide rates for adolescents aged 15–19 years increased in

the USA and UK, they declined slightly in the EU, from about 4·5 per 100 000 young people aged 15–19 years in 2010, to about 4·2 in 2019 (appendix p 3). Moreover, a large body of research relating adolescents' use of smartphones and social media to measures of their mental health has not found clinically meaningful correlations (appendix pp 5–6).[7]

In the 2010s, government-mandated changes in school policy in the USA and UK required strict adherence to standard curricula and standardised testing, which markedly increased the pressure and decreased the pleasure of schooling. This pressure has been shown to correlate strongly with increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among students (appendix pp 7–9).[8,9,10] Such an effect should not be surprising. Children spend more time in school than in any other setting except home, and in school they are micromanaged and regularly judged in relation to their peers. Their opportunities for play are severely restricted. Good teachers can reduce students' stress and increase their enjoyment by altering their teaching to meet students' needs and maintaining a playful attitude, but such changes are difficult when top-down mandates reduce teachers' autonomy. The effect of large nationwide changes in schooling on children's mental health deserves closer, careful consideration.

To reverse the large decline in children's mental health, societal factors affecting children's opportunities for play and other independent activities should be addressed. We should look for ways to renew children's opportunities for play and other independent activities in the physical world; recognise and promote the value of the internet as a vehicle for play and socialisation (with appropriate safeguards), rather than demonising it; and alter school policies in ways that increase, not decrease, the spirit of play and independent exploration in classrooms.

I declare no competing interests.

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