

Are Children's Lives Becoming Too Structured?

In her new book [Balanced and Barefoot](#), occupational therapist Angela Hanscom makes some interesting observations about the state children are in today. She writes:

“When I asked a few teachers about the play skills of children today compared to children thirty years ago, here is what one said: ‘There is less imaginary play. We used to see a lot of ‘pretend play’ in the past – children creating their own games and worlds on the playground. Now, they gravitate toward the play structure or play a game of tag until the whistle blows to go back inside.’ She went on to say, ‘It is really noisy and crazy. It seems like they run around without a purpose. There is little creativity like we observed in the past. It is like they don’t know what to do with themselves. There are a lot of children tattling and coming up to us to seek constant direction and reassurance on what to play or do.’”

Hanscom goes on to ask, “Why do [children] seem to prefer structured activities to unstructured ones and to seek adult guidance rather than lead peers on their own?”

In Hanscom's eyes, the answer to that question is that children are not encouraged and enabled to get outside and engage in free play as often as they were in the past.

But could there be more to it than that? Are children unable to function on their own because they have grown used to the continual, preplanned structure they are fed in school?

According to former teacher John Taylor Gatto, the answer is “yes.” Today's schools, Gatto noted, create “[empty children](#)” by constraining them to continual supervision and dependence

on adult instruction.

This is not to say that structure and discipline are not good for children – they are!

But have we gone overboard on structure? Instead of creating the creative, well-adjusted children which past generations have produced, has our cautious and heavy-handed school system instead created ill-functioning robots who do as they're told with no questions asked? If so, will that mindset one day condition those grown-up children to obey their government and leaders with no questions asked?

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