

Why Today's Kids Need More Time to Goof Off

Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is known world over for its deep lessons on racism and equality. In focusing on these lessons however, it's easy to breeze by the simple, lighthearted picture with which the book opens, namely, that of children goofing off and having a good time in the summer.

That lesson is one which many children no longer experience, nor even know how to execute. This is because they are scheduled from sun-up to sun-down with a myriad of activities to keep them busy and "learning" during the summer.

Such pre-scheduled activities are well-meaning, but as author and psychologist Lea Waters explains in a [recent article](#) for *The Atlantic*, the inability to goof off and have downtime may be preventing children from reaching their full potential:

"Smart strength-based parenting means holding firm against the pressure to constantly schedule kids so they look busy on the outside. Children are always busy, even when they don't look it. Letting a child press the pause button allows her to reboot her attentional resources and come back strong to continue building her strengths. Good goofing off is as an important part of a child becoming who they are."

To back up this statement, Waters cites a variety of research, including a study from Columbia University. The Columbia researchers found that grade school children who were given a variety of downtime during their school day "showed significant improvements in attentional skills and cognitive functioning... compared to having a full day of traditional academic classes." Such research, Waters opines, shows that "attention is built through rest and play."

Thomas Jefferson advanced the same idea several centuries ago. In [1786 letter](#) to Peter Carr, Jefferson advised regular exercise during which the mind should be allowed to rest and run in a neutral state:

“Give about two of them [hours], every day, to exercise; for health must not be sacrificed to learning. A strong body makes the mind strong. ... Never think of taking a book with you. The object of walking is to relax the mind. You should therefore not permit yourself even to think while you walk; but divert your attention by the objects surrounding you.”

Today's culture is characterized by busyness and the ability to multitask and run in several directions at once. In fact, many Americans pride themselves on the ability to do this and believe that making their children do the same will give them a head start in life.

But will it actually do the opposite? Do we need to recognize that today's children might be healthier, wealthier, and wiser by simply allowing them to have more downtime, goof off, and just be kids?

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