

The Fastest, Cheapest Child Therapy

If we agree there's a youth mental health crisis, can we also agree that "More therapists!" is not the only solution?

I worry our leaders automatically gravitate to middle-age solutions—yoga, therapy, meditation—even when they're trying to help KIDS.

They miss a FREE, immediate, easily accessible "therapy" all kids used to get: FREE PLAY.

All ages mixing! No electronic devices! Balls, chalk, jump rope, and voila—transformation! (Especially if you throw in some big cardboard boxes.)

We all remember how important our playtime was. It was when we made friends, invented games, argued, made up, ran, joked, laughed. THOSE ARE MENTAL HEALTH GODSENDS!

So, what should people do, starting, um, right this second?

PARENTS: Consider some easy ways to get your kids back outside. I culled these tips from letters to my nonprofit, Let Grow:

—Take walks with your kids to get them familiar with the neighborhood.

—Put lots of containers outside for kids to gather things, pour things, mix things (including dirt, water and anything else they find).

—Pitch a tent in your yard if you have one. (A yard that is. Or, come to think of it, a tent.)

—Invest in some good clothing so the cold isn't too cold.

–Invent some fake errands to get the kids used to being out and about. “Oh, dear! I want to bake chocolate chip cookies but we’re out of sugar!” is a one that has a lot of resonance.

–Can you put a pile of sand outside? Then do! One mom suggested “seeding” the sand with treasures like oyster shells or Happy Meal toys or what have you. (And we know you have McDonald’s toys.)

–Get a bunch of planks for the kids to build with. These can become forts, boats, mazes—then taken down and used again.

–Plant tall flowers in a circle around an area the kids can use as their junkyard.

–Say yes to the mess yourself!

–Most important of all? Go around trying to find other families who might want their kids to play outside, too.

–As for schools—while you’re waiting for a boatload of therapists, GIVE KIDS MORE PLAYTIME! It’s easy! HOW?

Just keep the school open before or after school for a mixed-age, device-free, loose parts (see above!) playtime. Have an adult supervise, but not organize the games or solve the spats.

Let Grow has an implementation guide for a program like that, if you’d like. It’s free as can be. Go to LetGrow.org and click on school programs.

But you don’t necessarily need a guide. Just let parents know their kids can come to school a little earlier and stay later. The kids will figure it out! Bonus: We’ve heard from administrators at schools with play clubs that discipline problems went DOWN when the amount of time kids got to spend playing went UP.

Therapy is great. I’ve done it myself. (I live in NYC—it’s

practically required. For years!) I've got nothing against all the other new ideas schools are trying, too: Breathing exercises, mindfulness, downward dogs—all good. But playing is the *original* social-emotional health curriculum!

And did I mention IT'S FREE? (Yes, I did. I know. So, I'll stop now. Send the kids out to play!)

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