

THE POWER OF PLAY

Unstructured activity missing in kids' lives

JESSICA BELASCO
jbsco@express-news.net

When I was a kid, my friends and I were always in motion. Climbing trees, wading in the creek, riding our bikes, jumping on my trampoline, playing in their pools, racing around the block in our Dallas neighborhood. We played because it was fun. We didn't realize it was healthy, too.

Not just because free play, or unstructured physical activity, wards off obesity and diabetes, but because it helps develop kids' muscles, bones and joints. Times have changed, though. Kids today aren't getting enough free play, and it's hurting their health.

Dr. Jorge Gómez, a pediatric sports medicine specialist, sees the evidence in his practice. He has always treated kids injured while they were playing sports; in recent years, he has started treating kids injured because they

never play sports.

Take the fourth-grader who hurt his right knee when his gym coach told the class to practice jumping and spinning 180 degrees before landing.

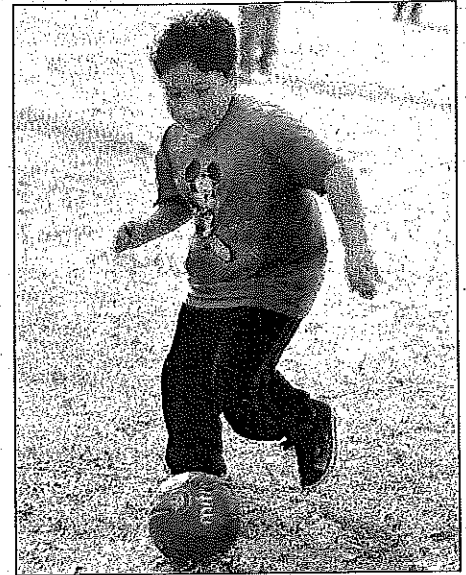
"What's happening is he, an otherwise normal, healthy kid, doesn't have the muscle coordination to stabilize his knee," says Gómez, a clinical professor of sports medicine and pediatrics at UT Health Science Center.

"These kids are poorly conditioned in the sense that they're not able to move in the way kids normally used to move without hurting themselves."

Video and computer games and studying for standardized tests have cut into play time and recess. Family structures also have changed so that parents and kids may be too busy to fit playtime into a packed schedule, and many parents now worry about the safety of unsupervised activity, says Susan Blackwood, executive



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KIN MAN HUI/kmhui@express-news.net

Zion Carmona, 7, plays a game of soccer with cousins at Brackenridge Park. Zion's parents, Vicky and Tony, encourage their son's physical activity.

See UNSTRUCTURED/3F



Unstructured activity known

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utive director of the San Antonio Sports Foundation.

The less kids play, the less they want to play, says Diana Everett, executive director of the Texas Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

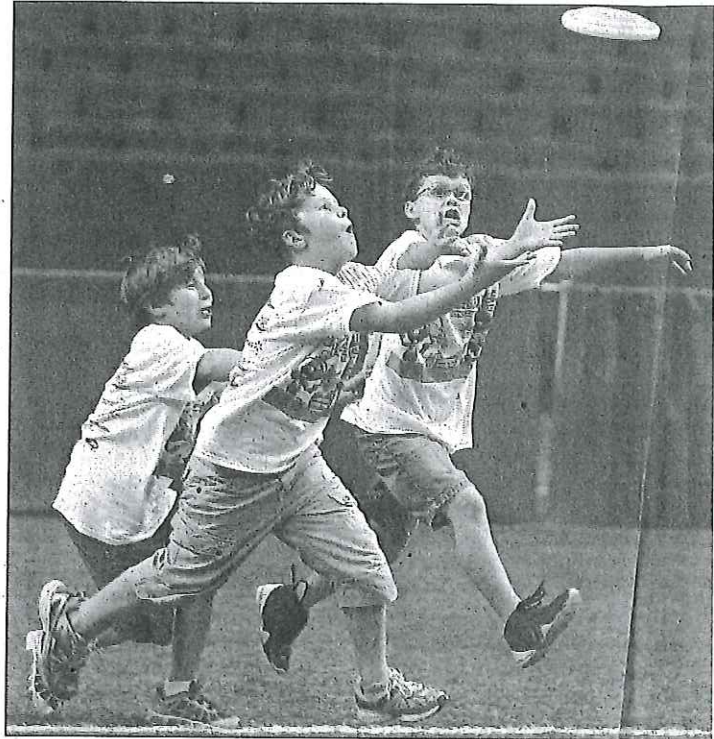
"Children love to be active," she says. "What we've done lately as a society is we've hooked them in to being physically inactive very early. They don't have that innate motivation to get out and play and do the things we used to do."

Lack of free play is affecting kids so drastically that North East Independent School District is adjusting its physical education curriculum to make up for it.

Students are entering elementary school with fine motor skills highly developed from playing video games but with poor gross motor skills typically developed through play, says Rachel Naylor, assistant director for physical education, health and athletics for the district.

Gym teachers must now emphasize such basic physical skills as running, climbing, skipping, jumping and throwing in their lesson plans.

"It used to be running was one of those natural skills stu-



JOHN DAVENPORT/jdavenport@express-news.net

Ten-year-old Mitch Markey (center front), Sam Clamp (right), 9, and Luke Markey, 8, chase a Frisbee at the Alamodome during the Valero Go!Kids Challenge Victory Lap Celebration.

dents just learned, and that's not the case anymore," Naylor says. "The percentage of students without those skills is growing tremendously."

Organized sports provide kids exercise, but they don't replace free play, Gómez says.

"It's an interesting paradox in our society. We've gotten more kids involved in organized youth sports than ever before, yet we see more kids who are not fit and come in with two or three musculoskeletal complaints," he says.

o develop healthy bodies

The federal government recommends that children exercise at least 60 minutes every day, but sports and games don't always add up to that.

In addition, the repertoire of movement in organized sports is often fairly limited, Gómez says.

Activities such as climbing trees and playing hopscotch, on the other hand, help develop children's bodies because they're moving in different ways, in different directions, at different speeds.

Kids don't necessarily engage in enough free play at school, either.

The state mandates that children in kindergarten through fifth grade receive at least 30 minutes per day or 135 minutes per week of physical activity, in the form of physical education or recess.

In some school districts, though, students may get only 15 minutes or less of playtime outside of P.E. classes.

Six years ago, the San Antonio Sports Foundation began the Valero Go!Kids Challenge in area schools to encourage kids to engage in daily vigorous physical activity. The kids receive prizes for fulfilling their exercise requirements.

"We give them credit for any 30 minutes that they're involved in any one of zillions of

activities, including free play," Blackwood, the foundation's executive director, says. "We want them to sweat. We want their little faces to be red so that they are pumping additional blood to their heart."

Blackwood says parents should give kids ample opportunities to engage in free play in a safe environment.

That's something the Gonzales family tries to do. Victoria, 8, and Abigail, 14, participate in organized sports, but they enjoy playing in the yard with their uncles. Or they'll ride their bikes while their father is doing chores outside.

"You have to make that time. The grass needs to be watered anyway," says their mother, Stephanie Gonzales.

Vicky and Tony Carmona also make sure their 7-year-old son, Zion, a second-grader at Benjamin Franklin Elementary, gets in plenty of running-around time.

Most weekends, they head to a park with Zion's cousins to play basketball, football or soccer.

"We all go out there and take snacks and juice and water and we just let them play," Vicky says. "We wanted to make it fun for him while he's doing it."

"Every day you do it, it gets funner and funner," Zion says.

That kind of unstructured play fosters an enjoyment of physical activity that will encourage kids to remain active through adulthood, according to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

Gómez, who was the honorary chairman for the 2008 Go!Kids Challenge, says families and communities must work together for provide opportunities for kids to play.

He wants to see more public parks and for neighborhoods to become more community-oriented so neighbors will watch over kids.

Parents also should try to make the time to fit free play into each day, he says.

"That might mean you have to watch them and neglect some other household activity," he says. "It's that important."

■ Johnny Depp stars in the 2003 adventure "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl" (7 p.m., KSAT, TV-14).

■ Catch six episodes of "South Park" (8 to 11 p.m., Comedy Central, TV-MA).

—Kevin McDonough,
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