

# Despite less play, children's use of imagination increases over two decades

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Children today may be busier than ever, but Case Western Reserve University psychologists have found that their imagination hasn't suffered – in fact, it appears to have increased.

Psychologists Jessica Dillon and Sandra Russ expected the opposite outcome when they analyzed 14 play studies that Russ conducted between 1985 and 2008.

But as they report in "Changes in Children's Play Over Two Decades," an article in the *Creativity Research Journal*, the data told a story contrary to common assumptions. First, children's use of [imagination](#) in play and their overall comfort and engagement with play activities actually increased over time. In addition, the results suggested that [children](#) today expressed less negative feelings in play. Finally, their capacity to express a wide range of positive emotions, to tell stories and to organize thoughts stayed consistent.

Dillon, a fifth-year doctoral student, and Russ, a professor in psychological sciences at Case Western Reserve, decided to revisit the play data after a 2007 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics showed children played less.

They set out to see if having less time for unstructured play affected the processes in play that influence cognition and emotional development, a focus of the play research.

The pretend play studies focused on children between the ages of 6 and 10. The children's play was measured for comfort, imagination, the range and amount of positive to negative emotions used and expressed, and the quality of storytelling by using Russ' Affect in Play Scale (APS).

The APS is a five-minute, unstructured play session. Children are asked to play freely with three wooden blocks and two human hand puppets. The play is videotaped, and later reviewed and scored for imagination, expression of emotions, actions and storytelling.

Russ explains that children who exhibit good play skills with imaginative and emotional play situations have shown better skills at coping, creativity and problem solving. She stresses there is no link between being a good player and intelligence.

The APS data provided a consistent measurement and research structure over the 23-year period. Russ said the consistency of having the same tool to measure play provided this unique opportunity to track changes in play.

"We were surprised that outside of imagination and comfort, play was consistent over time," said Dillon.

Russ did voice concern about the decrease in displayed negative emotions and actions. "Past studies have linked [negative emotions](#) in play with creativity," she said.

But even with the lack of time to play, Russ said, children, like some other forms of higher mammals, have a drive to play and always will find ways to do it.

As new stimuli, like video games and the Internet, have crept into everyday life, Russ explains that children might gain cognitive skills

from using technology where they once got it from acting out situations in play. Skills might also develop from daydreaming.

Russ said future research will need to focus on whether acting out emotions and creating stories in play is as important as it once was in helping children to be creative.

Even though children have less time these days for [play](#), Russ still advises giving children time for it, adding that it helps children develop emotional and cognitive abilities.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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