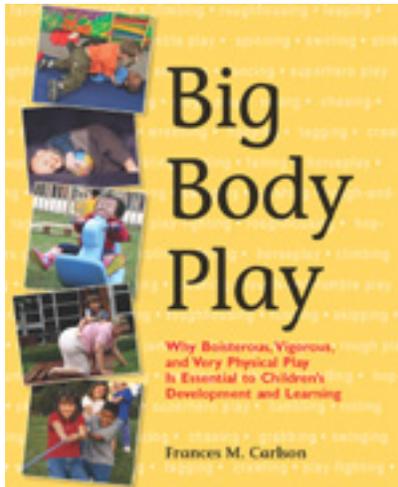


# Research News You Can Use: More Threats to Preschoolers' Play



*We focus on the hazards and pressures of keeping children safe. We feel anxious and unsure. But if we watch the faces of the children before us, we see joy. Children love this rough and rowdy play, and they need it. This book discusses why.*

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## By Kyle Snow, Ph.D.

A study released January 4, 2012, in the medical journal *Pediatrics* suggests that preschool programs' concerns about safety and preparing children academically for school are limiting children's opportunities for [big body play](#). The American Academy of Pediatrics also highlights the [special threats to play](#) experienced by children living in poverty. These children are especially likely to have limited access to high-quality and safe outdoor play spaces and may also be in programs under additional pressure to close the readiness gap for children entering kindergarten. Identifying these threats to big body play is only the first step in findings ways to address them.

In the study, the research team conducted a series of focus groups with 49 early child care and education providers from a range of programs (including inner city and suburban, Head Start, and private programs). Questions during the groups focused on perceived benefits and barriers to children's physical activity, primarily big body play, both in indoor and outdoor play spaces. Responses were coded for themes by the research team.

## What the Study Found

The authors described several themes from their focus groups:

- Early care and education programs may provide the only opportunity for some children to have physical activity or outdoor play.

- Programs are concerned about the possibility of injury and so limit children's opportunities to play.
- Costs for safe play space and equipment can be too high for programs to meet.
- Programs feel pressured to focus on classroom-based instruction to prepare children academically, taking time away from physical activity.

The authors report that while their focus groups generally agreed that physical play was important, especially because it may be available primarily through their program, they still felt constrained in how they could provide the opportunities for such activity.

## Concerns about Child Safety

The focus on child safety is not new and to some extent is warranted. Between 1996 and 2005, one national [study](#) noted that there were 2.1 million injuries reported to children younger than age 18 on playgrounds, with more than one-quarter (27%) of these among children younger than 5. However, this study did not report the circumstances (e.g., the time of day, level of supervision, type of early care or education setting or public space, etc.), so the actual risk to children, when playing in a space that is designed for safety and under the supervision of adults, is likely to be much lower. Indeed, providing both safe play spaces and adequate supervision are both among criteria used by NAEYC to accredit programs serving young children. However, not all play spaces for young children can be described as safe and supervised. A government [report](#) released in late 2011 found numerous safety violations among Head Start programs that were identified as being high-risk for noncompliance. The study authors and the [Head Start community](#) pointed out that in 21 of 24 of these programs, safety issues were "immediately corrected." While state licensing and other oversight agencies provide guidelines for ensuring the safety of playgrounds connected to early care and education programs, a 2010 [study](#) noted that these fully addressed only about one-third of the guidelines provided by the [National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care](#). The participants in this study are simply

observing, across the range of programs and diversity of children they serve, the challenge of providing safe places for children to play, and the costs related to doing so.

## **Focus on Academic Preparation**

The authors of the study also note that many programs are feeling the pressure to focus more on academics. This often results in competition between time for academics and instruction and time for play. While this column has [previously](#) described this as a false dichotomy, it is still a significant challenge to programs. An intensive [study](#) of four first-grade teachers underscored the challenges teachers feel in mapping their belief that play (in this study, play was primarily considered as child-initiated, within the classroom play activity) is beneficial, while at the same time relying upon instruction as the primary shaper of children's academic development. Another part of this issue, though, is the danger of narrowing our [definition](#) of what early childhood programs need to focus on to support children's school readiness. Not only is the tension between instruction and play, but it also suggests prioritization of academic skills over social, emotional, and physical development, all of which are also critical domains for young children's development. Certainly, the opportunity for vigorous physical play supports the development of [motor skills](#), and is also seen as one avenue for addressing childhood obesity.

## **Ensuring Children Have Opportunities for Big Body Play in Safe Spaces**

There is compelling [evidence](#) that access to space for active, physical play, is important for young children. Still, meeting the cost demands to build such places, or to ensure that existing play spaces are safe, can be daunting. To ensure existing play spaces are safe, state guidelines, as well as those provided by NAEYC program standards and the Head Start Program can be used to identify and remove hazards. In challenging economic times, finding funds to build new or dramatically renovate existing playgrounds can be overwhelming. The not-for-profit [KaBOOM!](#) works with communities to secure locations and funding to build safe, accessible playgrounds. This work does not

tend to include school or program facilities, but [Learning Structures](#), a similar partnership-based effort does work with schools and programs. There are numerous competitive grant programs ([here](#), for example) and resources ([here](#), for example) to help programs develop plans for and possibly acquire or build playgrounds. Most companies that make playground equipment may also be able to negotiate with programs to manage costs. Many of these groups and companies present or exhibit at [NAEYC events](#).

## **Recognizing the Importance of Physical Activity and Play for Young Children's Development**

Many organizations, including NAEYC, have written about the importance of physical play, and play generally, in early childhood development. Not only does research suggest that play supports academic-related skills, but also physical skills and development. As the *Pediatrics* article shows, pressures on early childhood programs that come from funding concerns and a lack of understanding the role of play and how to best use it to support early childhood development will continue to result in decisions that devalue play. NAEYC has numerous resources to help early education professionals integrate big body play into their programs to meet a range of developmental goals.

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*The [NAEYC Center for Applied Research](#) is dedicated to strengthening the connections between early childhood research, practice, and policy. One of the primary goals of the center is to encourage and support communication about research in early childhood development and education. To support teachers, policy makers, early education students, and others in the field in becoming critical consumers of information, the center helps them access and interpret research to inform their day-to-day work.*