

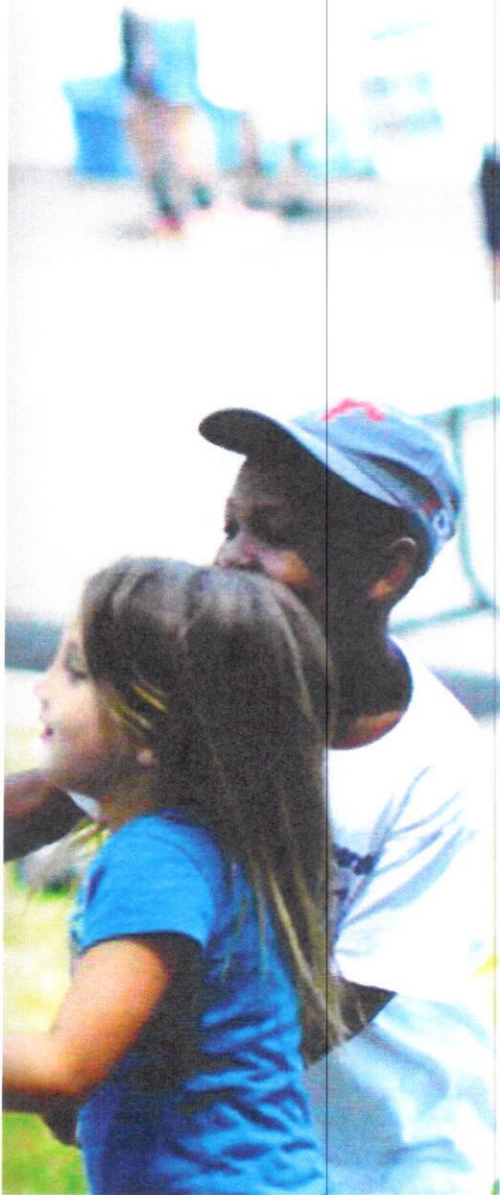
Imagine a Child as a Tree

FERTILIZE with UNSTRUCTURED, OUTDOOR PLAY, and CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

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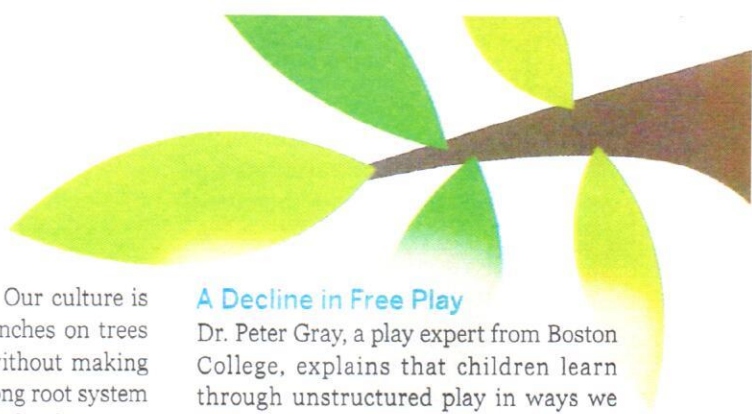
Ask anyone who has attended a camp as a child or youth about his or her experiences and you will receive many different responses. Camp has many meanings because of the personal nature of the experience. Over the past few years, subtle culture changes have created much greater challenges for camp/outdoor specialists because the landscape of the child has changed.



Imagine a child as a tree. Our culture is trying to grow strong branches on trees (cognitive development) without making sure that the tree has a strong root system (social/emotional/physical development). The result is our trees are struggling to stay nourished, energized, and productive because they can't grow strong branches without their roots receiving water and nourishment on a daily basis. Commonly, people are trying to grow trees indoors in planters with a little water (movement in the classroom for three to four minutes at a time) and a lot of artificial light, recirculated air, and food with minimal nutritional value. This creates root-bound trees that will stay stagnant or die and makes it hard for camp/outdoor specialists to be successful in their jobs, which is to grow stronger, more resilient roots for trees.

Camp is a place to explore, engage, and create. From pre-K through adolescence, kids should have the opportunity to learn essential life skills needed to navigate the world hopefully with a positive outlook. One of the perks of camp is the ability for children to be outside in nature and play in both structured and unstructured environments. As child advocacy expert Dr. Richard Louv (2008) explains, nature provides the platform to see things broadly and in a more relaxed environment, which he identifies as *field-focused learning*, versus more *target-focused learning*, concentrated indoors with computers and classroom content in a more stressed environment. When children are given the opportunity to appropriately develop their unfettered, field-focused lens, it is much less likely that emotional instability and attentional fatigue will manifest.

Nature provides an environment where all senses can be utilized and, in return, emotional stability can be restored. Time in nature and capitalizing on unstructured play is essential for children. Unfortunately, we are finding that children don't know what to do in nature anymore because they are raised indoors with very targeted tasks for seven plus hours daily. This is creating very emotionally unstable children who have many chronic illnesses and mental disorders that were not recognized or even identified 30 years ago.



A Decline in Free Play

Dr. Peter Gray, a play expert from Boston College, explains that children learn through unstructured play in ways we can't teach. In his book, *Free to Learn* (2013), he details continuing evidence of a decline in play and the rise of mental disorders. Play is defined as unstructured, self-chosen, and self-directed. This is the most important time when children can "regroup" and refocus their energies. It is when children learn to make choices, organize their own activities, negotiate with peers, solve their own problems, and take charge of their lives.

As camp specialists, you have probably noticed the need to adapt curriculum/protocols in order to reach the generation of children in outdoor environments today. Opportunities for socialization and learning how to coexist with others are rapidly declining. People have lost the ability to communicate effectively, empathize with one another, appreciate the little things, relax, and keep anger and anxiety in check. Self-esteem and resiliency for latch key and millennial kids have very different meanings than they did during the Baby Boomer and Gen X eras.

We have taken all responsibility away from kids — no thoughts, no decisions, no actions. If something doesn't feel good or creates failure, the adult steps in to make things better for the child. Children don't know how to react and interact in nature, in schools, or in jobs. They don't know how to explore in nature — and more disturbing — they may not even know what nature is. So many children are raised inside with little access to parks, outdoor experiences, the arts, and an active lifestyle. The school environment has become very stagnant, often lacking physical education, recess, music, and art. Schools purchase technology to use indoors for interactive learning over other forms of outdoor interactive experiences.

LiiNK

A research project called Let's Inspire Innovation 'N Kids (LiiNK) is making great strides to reverse the culture that has created this lost generation of children and youth who don't know, understand, or

appreciate the world around them. LiiNK is an innovative approach aligning the developmental needs of kids with unstructured, outdoor play and a character development curriculum called Positive Action (2007).

Play has very powerful properties that reach all aspects of self. The following chart identifies the maladaptive issues present when play is missing and the positive aspects of play when it is available daily (Gray, 2013). In today's culture, though, play alone will not be enough to set things right. Our culture has shifted from focusing on all developmental aspects of the child to only focusing on the child's cognitive development (i.e., testing); this shift is reflected in deteriorating behavior and social skills. So today's children also need a heavy dose of character development.

POSITIVE IMPACTS

LiiNK research (Rhea, Rivchun, & Pennings, 2016) has shown for three years now in private and public schools that when applying a simple adjustment in the daily schedule of unstructured, outdoor play every hour for 15 minutes each time combined with a character development curriculum that teaches children to think before they act, the following developmental aspects of a child are positively impacted:

- Social and moral development — empathy, communication with others, happiness with oneself, resiliency, true

self-esteem (belief in oneself even when challenged)

- Cognitive development — thinking before acting, attentional focus, appreciation for learning, retention, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving
- Physical development — agility, coordination, balance, strength, endurance, healthy body fat percentage, overall strong bodies
- Emotional development — relaxed (less anxious/distressed), comfortable in own skin, selfless, appreciative of nature/outdoors, learn the value of risky play

SUPPORTIVE INDICATORS

The following stories are supportive indicators of what can happen when children engage in unstructured play throughout the day and character education as LiiNK has established in school settings. These stories can translate to camps, outdoor afterschool programming, and parks and recreations settings.

- Social development: A little boy was helping his mother clean out his closet. He had two lunch boxes. He told her he didn't need both and wanted to give one of them to a friend who didn't have much. In fact, the friend loved the action figure on one of them, so he wanted to give that one to him. His mother agreed with his thinking. The boy came home the next day and told

his mom his friend really loved the lunch box and was so happy to receive it. He, as a result, felt really good for giving it to him.

- Cognitive development: Students were working on a writing assignment in class. The teacher said it was time to put the writing activity away, but the children wanted to continue writing. They were thoroughly enjoying the task. Their creativity has been greatly enhanced since beginning unstructured, outdoor play four times daily combined with the character development lessons weekly.
- Physical development: When children are given time throughout the day to play their way, without adult interaction, the playground changes. Children begin to use their bodies in different ways that are not required when traditional/structured sports are played. They jump in a full squat position uphill, roll downhill without any issues, role play different life roles with each other, and make up games with rules adults don't understand. They swing from bars, climb trees and walls, and play out in the fields with flowers, rocks, lady bugs, snails, ants, or other bugs. It's amazing to watch the physical development of the children when they are given the flexibility to play their way.
- Emotional development: Some children used to chew the pencil lead off of their pencils numerous times daily — no longer. Some children used to knock their name plates off of their desks several times a day when in kindergarten and first grade — the name cards now remain where they belong. Children in the LiiNK program will play at home now in the neighborhood after school — they play with ease and determination to support each other. When a child who hasn't had the benefit of a LiiNK program at school tries to engage, he or she is often rougher and more bullish. LiiNK kids will now tell that child to go home if he or she can't play more respectfully. Bullying is declining with LiiNK children, and their behavior is positively impacting the bullying behaviors of other children.

The Whole Child/Adult

When play is missing:

- Rise in narcissism
- Extrinsic control
- Others directed
- Lack of direction
- Anxiety/stress
- Internal struggles
- Void of self

When play is available:

- Self-controlled
- Self-directed
- Intrinsic control
- Rise in empathy
- Calm/relaxed
- Failure is part of growth
- Peace with self and identity

LiiNK Principles for Camp

What are basic LiiNK principles that camp/outdoor specialists can adopt in this environment?

1. Integrate unstructured, outdoor play into the daily camp activities every hour.
2. Continue to proactively teach good character lessons weekly, focusing on trust, honesty, respect, empathy, responsibility, and self-esteem.
3. Teach camp counselors to be in the moment with kids — learn from the experiences of kids.
4. Continue to have structured physical activity segments. This is just as important as the unstructured play experiences.
5. Remove balls from the unstructured play experience. Because sport and competition are often emphasized even at very early ages, the ball promotes competition through sport and rules instead of focusing one's energy on self-directed play with few rules and more cooperative behaviors. Keep the balls for structured physical activity experiences.
6. Teach concepts through different venues at camp, but then allow the children to free play as an extension of these concepts. Example: horseback riding skills for 45 minutes followed by 15 minutes of unstructured time for the children to ride without formal instruction.

Next Steps

What next steps can outdoor education/camp coordinators working with children take?

1. Children spend too much time at school, especially pre-K through fifth grade. If groups who concentrate on outdoor education can focus on after-school programs that take the children out of the school setting and allow them to experience play in parks or outdoor facilities, they will be healthier, happier, and more settled.
2. Develop programs that work with elementary, middle, and high school children in different scenarios that are developmentally appropriate. For example, elementary students

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MORE ABOUT LIIINK

The LiiNK program focuses on four key areas to transform learning in participating schools:

1. Increase the amount of physical activity/recess in schools.
2. Create equality across content areas. Add ethics/character development.
3. Assess students differently. Less standardized testing.
4. Restructure the school day. Less hours in the classroom with more time in play/creativity.

For more information on the LiiNK program, visit <http://liinkproject.tcu.edu>.



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should focus on simple tasks related to outdoor education (finding a target in the wilderness by matching a target on the map with the target in the field). By middle school, students should be focused on critical-thinking and problem-solving scenarios in the field with safety as a main focus. High schoolers should really be developing an appreciation for the outdoors through different wilderness challenges.

Through unstructured, outdoor play, STEM activities are promoted naturally. In a 15-minute unstructured play environment, research has shown children will spend a third of this time engaged in spatial, mathematical, and architectural activities. Focusing on the natural environment with a more unstructured approach allows children to develop key principles in math and geometry without adult input and through the interests of the children.

Photo on pages 36–37 courtesy of Brooks School Day Camp, North Andover, Massachusetts.

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Debbie Rhea, EdD, Texas Christian University professor and associate dean of research in Harris College of Nursing and Health Sciences, is the founder and director of the LiNK Project. She also consults with architects and landscape specialists on functional playground designs for schools that are more appealing to children and adolescents. She has been an educator for the past 36 years and recently received the Fort Worth Press 2016 Healthcare Hero Award.