CRISIS IN THE KINDERGARTEN: Why Children Need to Play in School

By Edward Miller and Joan Almon
From a report by the U.S. Alliance for Childhood

KINDERGARTEN has changed radically in the last two decades in ways that few Americans are aware of. Children now spend far more time being taught and tested on literacy and math skills than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations.

Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula geared to new state standards and linked to standardized tests. In an increasing number of kindergartens, teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. These practices, which are not well grounded in research, violate long-established principles of child development and good teaching. It is increasingly clear that they are compromising both children's health and their long-term prospects for success in school.

The traditional kindergarten classroom that most adults remember from childhood—with plenty of space and time for unstructured play and discovery, art and music, practicing social skills, and learning to enjoy learning—has largely disappeared.

The latest research indicates that, on a typical day, children in all-day kindergartens spend four to six times as much time in literacy and math instruction and taking or preparing for tests (about two to three hours per day) as in free

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play or "choice time" (30 minutes or less).

Kindergartners are now under great pressure to meet inappropriate expectations, including academic standards that until recently were reserved for first grade. At the same time, they are being denied the benefits of play—a major stress reliever.

This double burden, many experts believe, is contributing to a rise in anger and aggression in young children, reflected in increasing reports of severe behavior problems. Given the high rates of psychiatric disturbances among children today, it is critically important that early education practices promote physical and emotional health and not exacerbate illness.

High-stakes testing and test preparation in kindergarten are proliferating, as schools increasingly are required to make decisions on promotion, retention, and placement in gifted programs or special education classes on the basis of test scores. While some testing of children under age eight may be useful for screening, it is a highly unreliable method for assessing individual children.

Observational and curriculum-embedded performance assessments should be used instead. The argument that standardized testing takes less time and is therefore more efficient is called into question by new data suggesting that teachers are now spending 20 to 30 minutes per day preparing kindergarten children to take standardized tests.

The nine new studies and analyses on which our report is based all point to the same conclusion: kindergarten, long a beloved institution in American culture, is in crisis. If the problems are not recognized and remedied, the same ills will be passed on to preschools and even to programs for children ages birth to three.

The implications of these radical changes in early education practice reach far beyond schools. Until recently few people were talking about the long-term effects of the disappearance of children's play. Now, leaders of major business corporations are saying that creativity and play are the future of the U.S. economy.

The "Imagination Economy"

Daniel Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind*, writes about the "imagination economy," and says that "people have to be able to do something that can't be outsourced, something that's hard to automate and that delivers on the growing demand for nonmaterial things like stories and design. Typically these are things we associate with the right side of the brain, with artistic and empathetic and playful sorts of abilities." How can we expect our children to thrive in the imagination economy of the future if we

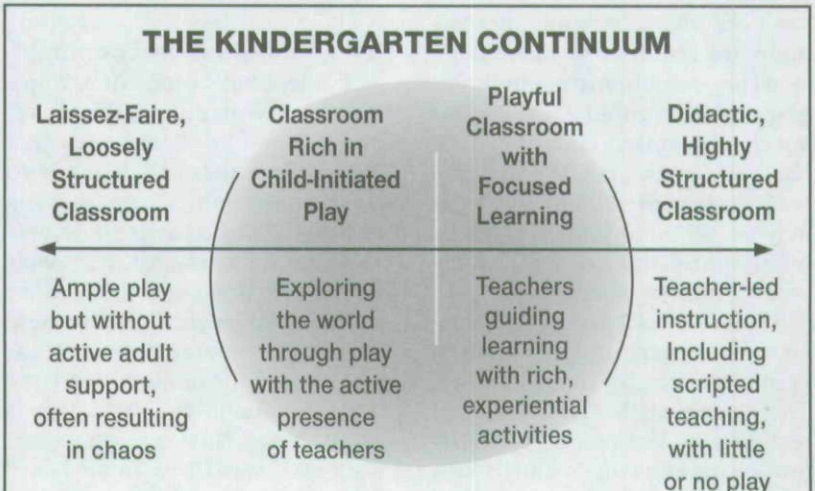
deny them opportunities for play and creativity in kindergarten?

We recognize that the restoration of child-initiated play to early education will not by itself solve the complex problems of helping all children—especially those with special needs or in poor families and neglected schools, as well as English-language learners—to reach their full potential. We are not calling for a simple return to the practices of an earlier time.

We now understand much better the rich experiences that young children need in order to become avid learners. Teachers need to understand the ways in which child-initiated play, when combined with playful, focused learning, leads to lifelong benefits in ways that didactic drills, standardized tests, and scripted teaching do not.

In a healthy kindergarten, play does not mean "anything goes." Nor is play so tightly structured by adults that children are denied the opportunity to learn through their own initiative and exploration. Kindergartners need a balance of child-initiated play in the presence of engaged teachers and more focused experiential learning guided by teachers. We call for educators, their professional organizations, and policy makers to develop as fully as possible the two central methods in the continuum (illustrated below) of approaches to kindergarten education:

The creation of a healthy balance has been blocked by current policies and government-imposed practices and programs, including No Child Left Behind and Reading First. These well-intentioned but



fundamentally flawed mandates rely on testing and on didactic and scripted approaches—especially for teaching children from low-income backgrounds—in spite of the fact that these practices are not well supported by research evidence. Indeed, many of the current approaches to kindergarten education are based on unfounded assumptions and preconceptions about what is best for children and schools.

If we are to best serve children and to foster the full professional development of early childhood educators, we must consider all the evidence of decades of research and experience—not just the results of a few narrow tests of suspect validity—and begin a thorough reassessment of our kindergarten policies and practices.

A Call for Action

We call on policy makers, educators, health professionals, researchers, and parents to take action as follows:

1. Restore child-initiated play and experiential learning with the active support of teachers to their rightful place at the heart of kindergarten education.

2. Reassess kindergarten standards to ensure that they promote developmentally appropriate practices, and eliminate those that do not.

3. End the inappropriate use in kindergarten of standardized tests, which are prone to serious error especially when given to children under age eight.

4. Expand the early childhood research agenda to examine the long-term impact of current preschool and kindergarten practices on the development of children from diverse backgrounds.

5. Give teachers of young children first-rate preparation that emphasizes the full development of the child and the importance of play, nurtures children's innate love of learning, and supports teachers' own capacities for creativity, autonomy, and integrity.

6. Use the crisis of play's disappearance from kindergarten to rally organizations and individuals to create a national movement for play in schools and communities. ■