

GROWTH CURVE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

# Kids' me time may boost brainpower

BY LAURA SANDERS 3:37PM, JULY 1, 2014



**FREE RANGE** Children who spent more time roaming free performed better on a word task than children whose schedules were crammed with structured activities, a new study finds.

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At the playground yesterday, Baby V commando-crawled through a tunnel with holes on the side. Every so often, I stuck my face in there with a loud "peekaboo." She reached up longingly toward the bouncy duck. I picked her up and steadied her as she lurched back and forth. She scrambled up some low stairs and launched down a slide. I lurked near the bottom, ready to assist and yell "yay" when she didn't face-plant.

The one thing I didn't do was sit back and leave her to her own devices, free from my **helicopter-mom** tendencies. But since I have the most ridiculous crush on that girl, it's hard for me to leave her be. As a parent who works outside of the home, I treasure our time together. But as she becomes more capable and independent, I realize that I need to be more thoughtful about letting her carve out some space for herself.

A recent research paper emphasized this point. The [study](#), published June 17 in *Frontiers in Psychology*, finds that children who spend more time in unstructured activities may better master some important life skills. Researchers sorted kids' activities into unstructured activities, which included child-initiated activities such as playing alone or with friends, singing, riding bikes and camping, and structured activities, including soccer practice, piano lessons, chores and homework.

Six- and seven-year-olds who had more unstructured time scored higher on a measure of executive function, complex cognitive abilities such as seamlessly switching between tasks, resisting impulses and paying attention — all things that help people get along in this world.

In the experiment, 70 six- and seven-year-olds came into the lab and were asked to name as many words that fall into a category as possible in a minute. To do well, it helps to subdivide the answers into categories. If the category was "food," a good approach would be to start with all the desserts first, then switch to vegetables, then go through picnic foods, and so on. Some children are good at self-directing these switches. They can recognize when they've tapped out a certain subcategory and move on to the next one without wasting a lot of time. This behavior, researchers reasoned, is a proxy for good executive function.

The kids who were best at this task-switching were the ones who spent the most time in unstructured activities, the researchers found by analyzing detailed activity logs filled out by the parents. The children who got the most time free from adult interference were the top performers on the word test.

Executive function is like a muscle that must be exercised, the researchers argue. And kids practice self-sufficiency only when they don't have an adult hovering over them. Time spent in unstructured, self-directed play lets kids figure out how to self-regulate, allowing them to set goals and formulate plans: "First, I'll go bang on that duck. Then I might throw some wood chips on the slide. Then I'll take them off. Then I'll put more on."

An Atlantic [piece](#) earlier this year by Hanna Rosin raises some of these points. Through a discussion of playground safety (or lack thereof for some British playgrounds that feature fire pits, rusty old mattresses and rope swings over creeks), Rosin questions whether overprotective parents squelch independence, risk-taking and creativity. It's an excellent question, and one that will become more and more relevant for me as Baby V grows up and gains new mischief-making abilities.