

# LET THERE BE PLAY

Fullan, Josh . The Globe and Mail ; Toronto, Ont. [Toronto, Ont]. 22 May 2021: O4.

[ProQuest document link](#)

---

## FULL TEXT

Josh Fullan is the director of Maximum City, a national engagement and education firm.

In the second summer of the pandemic, let there be play. Let there be play in cities and towns, at campsites and lakesides, in fields and forests and on farms and reserves. Let there be play indoors and out, online and in person. Let there be play in the consecrated places, such as parks and playgrounds, but also in the once-forbidden, newly necessary places such as streets and sidewalks. Let there be play with friends and family and with total strangers. Let the play be structured, let it be risky and improvisational. Let it be loud. Let the sounds of play ring all across the country, from solstice to equinox.

Make all the summer a game and children its players.

And let no adult or spoilsport utter a word of complaint. Because it is impossible to overstate how much kids have earned a summer of play.

In the summer of play, all play matters. Is making a TikTok video play? You bet. Is riding a bike? Absolutely. How about digging in the dirt? Balancing on one foot?

Yes and yes. And what about active outdoor play versus video games? Is a soccer match better for you than Fortnite? The summer of play contains countless options and is no time to get hierarchical. Let all forms of play flourish until deficits and variety are restored.

If this appeal sounds like evangelizing, it is not summoned by blind faith. Play, already recognized before the pandemic for its holistic benefits for all ages, might be the single-dose prescription for restoring and protecting children's emotional and physical health after many months of lockdowns and school closings.

Of course, a proper summer overfull with play depends on transmission being low and vaccinations being high. In COVID-19 hot spots, a summer of play may feel like pure fantasy rather than something within our grasp. But it's attainable and certainly worth fighting for, with the right combination of pressure and support that includes easing restrictions on outdoor activities everywhere and dedicating shared spaces for play in the hardest-hit communities.

Count me as a recent convert among play acolytes. A year into studying and listening to the experiences of thousands of young children and teens during the pandemic, I am frankly surprised to be writing that play is emerging as the most powerful correlating factor to their well-being.

More than race, income or location, changes in play time are a dividing line between young Canadians who report doing fine or even thriving during the pandemic and those who say they are struggling at school and in their personal lives.

The result doesn't mean play trumps sociology or environment. It points to play as a modifiable behaviour with multifaceted benefits that can absorb and counterbalance some of the blunt and unequal forces of the pandemic. When it comes to the unfair effects of COVID-19, play is both cushion and counterpunch.

Think of every child as having a play bank they fill up or draw from depending on their recent and cumulative level of play. This bank helps sustain other areas of the child's life - positive emotions and relationships, development and learning, physical health. During the pandemic, whether from isolation or restriction or lack of access to space, many children have depleted their play banks and are now running on fumes, which is having a noxious effect. They feel stressed and tired.

They are bored and unmoved by the things that normally fill them with joy or excitement. They spend less time outdoors, more time on screens. Their sleep is lousy. They worry a lot - about getting COVID-19, about falling behind at school, about the effect this terrible year-and-counting is having on their parents. On the other side of the great divide, kids who maintained or increased their play time report being happier, calmer, more rested and focused.

The fear that many kids have of falling behind at school is no surprise, as the chatter about the need for students to catch up on learning loss is as old as the pandemic itself. Do not mistake this chatter for evidence in favour of summer school and against a summer of play. The argument sounds logical: Kids are getting an inferior education, so they need to cram and get additional class time to avoid falling irrevocably behind. This is a narrow, retrograde view of what learning is and is blind to the conditions under which it flourishes. Well-being unlocks learning, and vice versa. Kids in our study who maintained or increased play time not only showed dramatically better emotional health but were also stronger students who said they learned more, reported higher levels of school engagement and collaboration and were able to concentrate and stick with a problem longer.

During times of crisis and recovery - our foreseeable future, in other words - well-being and learning aren't just complementary; they are the same thing. Reactively rushing to fill the learning gap with summer school without addressing mental and physical health would be akin to pouring water into a bucket with no bottom. Schools should also heed this warning when they return, in whatever form, in the fall.

You can't drill or cram your way back to academic excellence without rebuilding relationships with peers and teachers, fostering social intelligence, spending time outdoors and participating in sports and extracurriculars. For restoring focus and a sense of purpose, tap into the heightened sense of empathy and citizenship that many young people are feeling right now as they watch the world around them burn and leaders struggle, or abjectly fail, to put out the fire.

Let the summer of play be an acknowledgment of all the sacrifices young people have made, with abundant grace, during the pandemic. Let it be a thank you and a reward and enabler of happier, healthier kids who will be deeper thinkers and better problem solvers come September. Let it be a jailbreak, a joyful noise outside our open windows.

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Coronaviruses; Outdoor activities; Learning; Pandemics; School closures; Disease transmission; COVID-19
<b>Publication title:</b>	The Globe and Mail; Toronto, Ont.
<b>First page:</b>	04
<b>Publication year:</b>	2021
<b>Publication date:</b>	May 22, 2021
<b>Section:</b>	Opinion
<b>Publisher:</b>	The Globe and Mail
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Toronto, Ont.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	Canada, Toronto, Ont.
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--Canada