

## original article

# Could it be that “doing nothing” is a healthy teenage behaviour?

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In recent years, debates about how best to manage young people's free time in order to maximise opportunities for their healthy personal development and socialisation are centre stage among child health practitioners, psychologists and educationalists and, often, a nightmarish concern for parents. The latter reportedly experience great levels of stress in the frantic race of raising well-rounded, emotionally healthy and academically achieving children\*. More importantly, though, research shows that youngsters themselves experience pressure due to their overscheduled lifestyles, which often leave them with little time to play and engage in unplanned, yet equally significant, activities, such as spending time with their friends (Gleave and Kapasi, 2009). Popular parenting books and psychology literature (e.g. Crain's *Reclaiming childhood: Letting children be children in our achievement-oriented society*, 2003) also suggest that the lives of many young people are replete with anxiety, seemingly thus pointing to the need for a more balanced, carefree childhood.

## No messing around

Interestingly, however, although health researchers and practitioners caution against overburdening young people with extra-curricular activities, discussion on the *benefits* for youngsters of unstructured free time, of “doing nothing” and hanging out with their friends is still insufficient and mostly anecdotal. Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles (2006) partly attribute this silence to the increasing dependence of psychological research on its timely and

appropriate integration with policy. Young people's practice of spending time with their friends or alone on fortuitous activities is typically seen by parents, teachers, as well as policy makers as an unproductive waste of time, which may even lead youngsters to drifting into antisocial behaviours. Matthews, Taylor, Percy-Smith, and Limb (2000), for example, illustrate the unfair victimisation of youngsters who hang out at shopping malls, which is arguably based on the ungrounded assumption that a group of children meandering in public space are anything but innocent; they must be either troublemakers or, even, shoplifters. It is then no surprise that advocating youngsters “doing nothing” can hardly pass through the policy making threshold. In a world that nurtures antagonism from the very early childhood years, and venerates the tangibles of success, whether these are school grades and diplomas, what counts are purposeful and goal-oriented activities, as opposed to random chatting with friends or aimless Internet browsing. This partly, then, explains adults' effort to regulate children's use of online resources, which offer unprecedented opportunities for unsupervised and fortuitous messing around. Horst, Herr-Stephenson, and Robinson (2010, p. 47) argue, for example, that

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\*The terms “children” and “young people” are used interchangeably in the context of this paper, following the diverse ways in which they feature in the referenced sources.

the desire to restrict hanging-out practices at school in favour of keeping students "on task" while using new media and technology for production or research, combined with concerns about which media and websites are suitable for citation, can prompt teachers and principals to develop rules about the appropriate use of media structures.

Various childhood sociologists and psychologists argue that the roots of the over-scheduling phenomenon can be traced even deeper to the prevailing social perceptions of youth, which is typically seen as a transitional phase from immaturity to adulthood, rather than a life cycle of its own (Matthews et al., 2000). In this light, the process of upbringing should be highly controlled and regulated, so that youngsters develop into responsible citizens, according to the adult perspective and status quo. This arguably also explains the tendency to organise meticulously young people's free time with extra-curricular activities, which aim at their socialisation, personal development and success.

However, childhood is becoming increasingly liquidated, with the gap of generations constantly narrowing and youngsters permeating areas that were previously an adult preserve: from formal decision-making panels in governing bodies to the cityscape, streets and malls. Thus, while parent's efforts are directed towards balancing surveillance and protection on the one hand, and opportunities for independent initiative on the other, by means of providing safe, organised learning contexts, young people are obstinately claiming even more autonomy, especially in the face of peer pressure to "play" outside the home, further, longer and later (Matthews et al., 2000, citing Valentine, 1999). When young people's presence and agency in public space, however, is not grounded on purposeful activities and set learning objectives, it is often seen as discrepant. Put simply, a

group of teenagers hanging out in playgrounds, especially during the evening when unregulated by the adult gaze, is perceived as unacceptable and dangerous, in contrast with toddlers' use of the designated space, in daylight and under adult control (Matthews et al., 2000).

### **Growing up obliquely: examples of young people's fortuitous learning and meaning-making**

And yet, we tend to forget as parents, psychologists and educators that the most effective learning, seen in the broadest of senses, takes place with a more natural rhythm for youngsters than the pace imposed by goal-directed activities; and in an environment that takes advantage of children's own natural curiosity, with adults providing an unobtrusive presence (Jackson, 2008). This kind of experiential learning, which is based on one's own needs and natural inclinations, enables youngsters to develop autonomy, which is arguably the healthiest coping strategy and attitude to problem solving (Jackson, 2008). Take, for example, teenagers fortuitous online searching. It involves a flexible, open-ended genre of participation in the networked and digital media ecology, which enables these fluid shifts in attention and co-presence between online and offline contexts (Horst et al., 2010). As Horst et al. (2010, p. 65) further argue, although this kind of messing around is usually seen as

a challenge to traditional ways of finding and sharing information, solving problems, or consuming media, it also represents a highly productive space for young people in which they can begin to explore specific interests and to connect with people outside their local friendship groups.

Rather than being a waste of time, this digital messing around forges an array of opportunities for youngsters' sociability and

play. It represents a strategy, though more informal from institutional learning practices and formal socialisation contexts, for finding resources to facilitate homework, play creatively and share all such activity with their peers. Above all, it is an important step into unfamiliar worlds, without, however, requiring expert knowledge to begin; it is usually a self-directed, self-taught activity, which enables teenagers to develop a sense of agency and ownership and thus scaffold future learning experiences (Horst et al., 2010). These are all critical life skills for young people's healthy adaptation in a complex world, where individuals are required to balance initiative and co-operation.

Another example of how unstructured free time can be a powerful opportunity for socialising and learning is youngsters hanging out in malls and shopping centres. According to research by Matthews et al. (2000), what teenagers like about such places is that they can meet with their friends in a safe, warm and dry space; watch people and the bright lights; eat and shop; chat and banter playfully. Even though such activity may seem pointless to the adult perspective, it is nonetheless an important medium for young people's *own* socialisation, a way to assert their sense of belonging and group membership (Matthews et al., 2000). "Just being" with their friends has been identified elsewhere in research as a significant reason for young people to participate in extra-curricular activities (Patsarika, 2011). What is more, Patsarika's research has demonstrated that although informal activities may lack the educational, *didactic* element that organised frameworks of activity essentially promote, it is their intrinsically experiential and *participatory* element that enables young people to construct their value systems, personal and group identities and, thus, build a healthy moral character.

### Theorists on "doing nothing" and its benefits for young people's health and well-being

Stemming from the above discussions is that more attention should be perhaps directed to the social, emotional as well as cognitive benefits of unstructured free time for youngsters. Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Eyer (2008) keenly defend the so-called "empty hours" that leave youngsters to their own devices, even to the point of being bored, which is when the urge to use one's own imagination and creativity comes in. According to Hirsh-Pasek et al., young people need time to daydream, reflect on and nurture their inner lives, and sensibly manage their own time. Freed from the "safety-net" of organised activity frameworks, they learn how to explore the world at their own pace and handle problems with others and on their own. This, in turn, enables them to develop self-responsibility and self-reliance. For all these reasons, Hirsh-Pasek et al. argue, parents should not lament that their children should be always "doing something"; it is when free time lacks a predefined objective that opportunities for children to discover, create and innovate open up.

Importantly, all this is supported by evidence from clinical and children's literature that spontaneous activities have a positive impact on young people's emotional, psychological and, even, physical health; Elkind (2008), for example, argues that a "light-hearted" approach to childhood increases chances for their academic achievement, happiness and overall well-being. Similarly, Rosenfield and Wise (2001) caution against overloading children with extra-curricular activities, which may lead to burnout with a range of symptoms: from headaches and stomachaches to temper tantrums, sleeping problems and difficulty to concentrate at school.

Willis (1990) argues that young people's casual interactions rather than simply adorning their "official" public lives as learners, i.e. adults and citizens in-the-making, are essentially creative through their symbolic power. They enable young people to develop their vital capacities and find alternatives to the impoverished roles proffered by modern state bureaucracies and rationalised industry and, thereby, leave their own small mark in the world. In condemning young people's unorthodox and seemingly idle way of ascertaining their agency in their social milieus, we deny them the essential tools of growing up healthy and confident human beings.

Educational research complements this discussion in suggesting that a rounded and healthy human disposition involves both formal and ordinary, inconsequential practices. As Jackson (2008) puts it, "Homo Sapiens" (i.e. the wise man) occurs from the intertwining of *all* human dimensions: "Man as Maker", "Man as Knower" as well as "Man as Enquirer" or "Man as Player". In this light, he argues that play is not something that we do; it is who we are, a cultural disposition. Such an all-encompassing understanding of the notion of engaging with the world, i.e. as learning, playing and messing around, defines humans complex, rich, messy and ever-changing relationship with it (Jackson, 2008).

## Conclusions

Reflecting on the above debates, my intention has not been to weigh the pros and cons of young people's organised and unstructured activities, thus introducing dichotomous understandings in the modern epidemic of guidelines and manuals for raising healthy and successful children. The benefits for young people of organised activities are numerous and indisputable, discussed as they are by psychological research (e.g. Mahoney et al.,

2006). The aim of this paper, instead, has been to exculpate the practice of "doing nothing" as a healthy teenage behaviour, which is hopefully shown to deserve more attention by academic researchers and practitioners alike.

By the same token, although the paper brought forward the power relationships between adults and young people, its goal has not been to broaden the gap between the adult and child perspective. What might be an interesting reflection to muse on, however, is that our understandings of young people's growth and socialisation more than often impinge on stereotypes about their social role as immature learners growing into the "normal" state of adulthood. Dominant adult perceptions of what constitutes "best practice" for young people's learning, emotional development and overall well-being (e.g. through regulated Internet use, or delineated and controlled use of public space), partly stem from the constructed divide between childhood and adulthood. It is, therefore, important that we acknowledge and embrace each young person's particular emotional, psychological, physical and cognitive needs, and engage in open dialogue with them, in order to help them live balanced and happy lives, both in the present and future. ■

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