

# THE RETURN OF PLAY

By Joan Almon

**AS A SCHOOL-AGED CHILD,** I heard these magical words: “Go out and play and come home when the street lights come on.” They were common in my childhood, but one rarely hears them, or anything like them, today. Most neighborhoods are as safe now as they were then, but they are perceived as being much more dangerous. That, combined with the long hours children spend with screens or in adult-organized activities, leaves little time for children to go out and create their own play scenarios with friends.

For several decades we’ve watched children’s free play practically disappear, but fortunately it is on the rise again, thanks to the tireless efforts of play advocates across the country, including here in Chicago. Increasingly, it is understood that play contributes strongly to children’s health and well-being, and the absence of play has been associated with growing problems in children’s physical and mental health. Physicians and health organizations have begun recommending play as an antidote to diverse health problems, including depression, anxiety, and hyperactive disorders.

One example is in the area of childhood obesity. About one-third of America’s children are now overweight or obese and run a risk of many health problems, including type 2 diabetes, eating disorders, and asthma.

For years obesity experts have advocated a two-pronged approach to the problem, focusing on diet and exercise. Some reductions in obesity among young

children have been noted, but overall progress is much slower than hoped for. Now a third element has been added — play, especially physically active play. While all forms of child-directed play benefit children, an Australian study found that when children at recess played with “loose parts,” they engaged in more physical activity than children who played on fixed equipment and in designated sports areas.

But what are loose parts? They are open-ended play materials that can be used in multiple ways according to the wishes of the children. They may be natural materials such as sand, water, rocks, and branches. Or, they may be classic play objects like balls, hoops, and jump ropes. Or, they can be recycled materials like boxes and crates, tires and tubes. Loose parts stimulate children’s imaginations and keep them playing for hours.

On a previous visit to Chicago, I spoke with parents about loose parts. A short time later a mother reported this experience. Her five-year-old son frequently had difficulty playing with other children. One day they invited another child to their home for a playdate, but things were not going well despite an abundance of toys. Then the mother remembered loose parts. She went through her house gathering materials the children could play with. To her amazement, they played with them beautifully for the next few hours.

Many of the play initiatives springing up across the country feature loose parts. Some are single play days, often called Pop-Up Play Days.

Others focus on enhancing play during school recess by installing “playpods,” simple containers filled with loose parts. This approach is widespread in England, and on a recent trip I was very impressed with a visit to a

public school with a playpod. About 200 children, ages 6 to 14, played peacefully on the asphalt playground using nets, ropes, crates, tubes, and dress ups. I felt I had slipped back a century or two. When

*Continued on page 10*

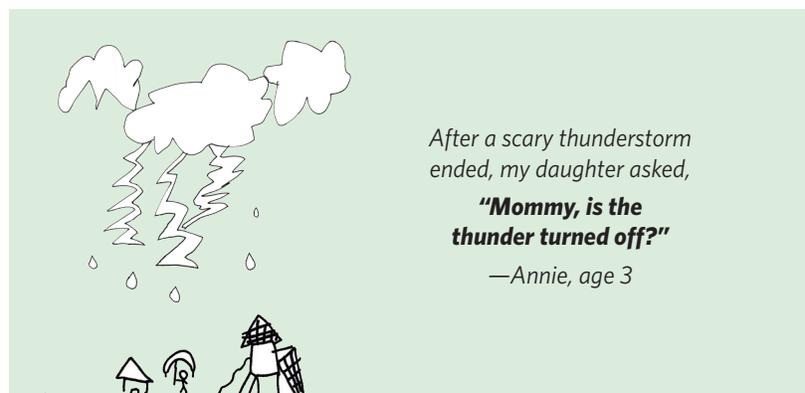


# Smile!

Happy looks good on you.

**Call today to schedule your complimentary consultation!**  
847.446.2245 | [BradyandFord.com](http://BradyandFord.com)

**BRADY & FORD**  
ORTHODONTICS



*After a scary thunderstorm ended, my daughter asked,*

**“Mommy, is the thunder turned off?”**

—Annie, age 3



**KIDSTRONG**  
PHYSICAL THERAPY

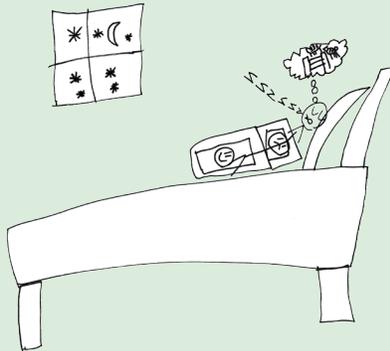
Stephanie Figlioli, PT

312-520-3759 • stephanie@kidstrongphysicaltherapy.com  
310 Happ Road • Suite #207 • Northfield, Illinois 60093



**Grins**  
on Green Bay  
Pediatric Dentistry

632 Green Bay Road Kenilworth, IL 60043 847.728.0030  
www.GrinsOnGreenBay.com



I was awake early one morning and decided to go downstairs and do some work while the kids were still sleeping. My 4-year-old, who usually is awake first in the house, came downstairs and said, laughing,

**"Mommy, you are not supposed to be downstairs yet. You need to be in your bed!"**

I asked one of the recess aides what it was like for the staff to have the playpod, she spoke with great enthusiasm. "We used to have to intervene in their play all the time, but now with the loose parts the children play so well there is really not much for us to do."

The ultimate use of loose parts play can be seen in adventure playgrounds, which often make tools and lumber available to children who then build one, two, or even three-story structures to play in. They look crooked and ramshackle but are actually quite sturdy, held together by an abundance of nails. At first these playgrounds appear very dangerous to adults, but the safety record at adventure playgrounds is very good. They offer children as much risk as they can handle, and children respond by activating their inner capacity for risk assessment. They may suffer bumps, bruises, and occasional splinters, but they do a good job avoiding serious injury.

The Alliance for Childhood, a national organization that focuses on restoring play to children's lives, is thrilled to see the new wave of play activity. We asked about 20 play initiatives, including The Alliance for Early Childhood, to describe their play activities and provide photos. The result is a recent book called *Playing It Up – With loose parts, playpods, and adventure playgrounds*. It can be viewed online at [www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org) or purchased from Amazon.

While I edited the book, I kept thinking, what if every child had a chance to play with loose parts – at school, in parks, camps, and neighborhoods. What improvements we would see in their physical and mental health, as well as their social and emotional well-

being. It doesn't take much money – just good will, some training, and a commitment to support children's play. It's very doable and encourages play every day. And who knows, maybe one day we'll again hear parents say, "Just go out and play and don't come home 'til supper!" ●

**Books by the Alliance for Childhood (see [allianceforchildhood.org/publications](http://allianceforchildhood.org/publications))**

- *Playing It Up* – With loose parts, playpods, and adventure playgrounds
- *Adventure: The value of risk in children's play*
- *The Playwork Primer*

**Videos of loose parts play**

- Providence PlayCorps project: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3gNhRHt16o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3gNhRHt16o)
- UK playpod videos:
  - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=laFA9QqPP14](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laFA9QqPP14) (early childhood)
  - [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqilKyJJeKg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqilKyJJeKg) (grade school)

*Joan Almon was a Waldorf early childhood educator for over thirty years and then co-founded the Alliance for Childhood out of a deep concern for the decline in children's health and wellbeing. She is known for her work to restore play to children's lives in early education, in school settings, and in communities.*

**SAVE THE DATE**

Hear Joan Almon address, "The Rise of Play: How We Can Support It At Home, In School, And In The Community."

**Wednesday, November 8, 9:30-11am**

Free and open to the public. For more information, visit [www.TheAllianceForEC.org](http://www.TheAllianceForEC.org).