

Having fun and playing makes kids smarter ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Xavier Samuel, aged 5, beats upon a homemade cardboard drum, is he (a) playing, (b) working, or (c) building a brighter and more prosperous future for Ontario?

The right answer - as Randy Samuel, the boy's mother knows all too well - is (d) all of the above.

"Play is very important," said Samuel, a vivacious young woman from North York, who was basking in the sunshine on Sunday along with her drumbeating offspring and hundreds of other families, all intent on doing something that seems to come pretty naturally to kids, if not always to their parents.

It's called Having Fun - a long-maligned concept that is enjoying a renaissance in many parts of the globe, perhaps especially in Ontario.

"Look at all the parents interacting with their kids," said Samuel. "You can tell the difference between the ones who know how to interact and those who are just learning."

There were plenty of learning opportunities for everyone Sunday at Canada's first ever Ultimate Block Party, a free event for families sponsored by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario.

The one-day extravaganza filled Fort York with games, storytellers, live music, science experiments, calisthenics, tutus, and a quarter-million green Lego blocks, all in service of a revolutionary idea in early childhood education - let kids play.

"Children shouldn't stop playing so they can sit still and do their work," said Janet Millar Grant, an early learning expert at the teachers' federation. "Play is the work of children."

Last fall, Ontario's public schools began implementing play-based learning in kindergartens, where kids aged 4 and 5 are now encouraged to follow their own noses to amusement and enlightenment rather than be told what to think or do.

"You guys are leading the way around the world," said Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, an expert in developmental psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. "You guys get it."

Last fall, Hirsh-Pasek helped organize the inaugural Ultimate Block Party in New York's Central Park, a daylong celebration of play that attracted 50,000 adults and kids.

Sunday's event in Toronto produced a more modest turnout of between 3,000 and 4,000, but its goal was the same - to promote the importance of unstructured activity (a.k.a. "play") in the cognitive and social development of children.

"It's active versus passive learning," said Hirsh-Pasek. "The data we have from around the world show that, if you start early, you will reap the benefits for a lifetime."

Finland is widely considered the world leader in play-based learning, but Canada is near the top, say the experts, while the United States lags far behind.

"We will not be leaders in the future," said Hirsh-Pasek, an American.

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-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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