

Let's Play Kids: Active Play and Mental Health of Children in the Philippines

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Dear Editor,

I came across an interesting article published in this journal concerning the benefits of a schoolyard playground on the attitudes toward school and peer relationships among elementary school students in India. The authors highlighted that recreational/active play (R/AP) has a tremendous impact on the mental health and emotional well-being of the person's long-term growth development. Thus, schools must also prioritize play spaces and recreational equipment, similar to addressing the academic needs of children.¹ These findings are indeed commendable and can be applied in developing countries, like the Philippines, where many children suffer from different social and mental health problems, especially during the height of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. With this, I aim to elaborate more on Filipino children's situation, especially mental health. I will also discuss the benefits of R/AP and propose interventions on how the county can promote it effectively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children were one of the most affected in terms of their mental health. The health crisis has created the most significant disruption of education systems in history, involving 190 countries with nearly 1.6 billion students. The Philippines was one of the last few countries to transition back to face-to-face learning after the COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted more than 2 years.² Unfortunately, the high prevalence of physical inactivity among Filipino children raises a public health issue that deserves much attention from local public health authorities and stakeholders. In the first-ever comprehensive report on the status of the physical activity of children and adolescents in 2022, the report card graded the overall physical activity of Filipino children and adolescents with a mark of F or fail. This grade is based on the data that only 15.4% of Filipino adolescents and children were sufficiently active.³ The sudden and unprepared shift to online classes increases the burden on the mental well-being of children with the excessive use of technologies and

voluminous school requirements that result in stress, cramming, pressure, overthinking, and sleep disruptions. There is also the feeling of fear and anxiety of contracting the virus by themselves and their family members, unemployed parents, which will affect financial stability and the decrease of social support from school peers that collectively add burden to their mental well-being. Children living with preexisting mental health conditions and living in cramped households and communities face worse circumstances.⁴ Lastly, there are also cases of hopelessness and depression that result in having suicidal thoughts and suicide itself. The suicide rate was 2.5 per 100 000 population in 2019, and it increased to 26% in 2021 when the Department of Education (DepEd) reported 404 cases, 2147 learners had attempted, and 775 962 sought guidance counseling at the height of the pandemic.⁵ It is no wonder that it is called a mental health emergency.

R/AP may involve symbolic activity or games with rules; the activity may be social or solitary. However, the distinguishing features are a playful context combined with an activity significantly above the resting metabolic rate.⁶ In other cases, R/AP can also be an unstructured physical activity that takes place outdoors in a child's free time.⁷ Experts and researchers have attested to the many benefits of R/AP on children's mental health and the other connected aspects of their being. It promotes positive feelings that reduce undesirable behaviors, such as bullying. It also teaches them to navigate conflict, which helps them find solutions for future real-life situations. It is an excellent opportunity to expend energy by compartmentalizing or holding in solid emotions, creating a pent-up supply of negativity,

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anger, or anxiety. Lastly, it establishes normalcy and promotes healing after difficult situations.⁸

As interventions, the government, in collaboration with the private sector must invest more and provide sufficient funding to build play spaces, like playgrounds, parks, and sports facilities in the country. These playgrounds and parks should have swings, slides, and other ball games features to enhance physical movements. If more funding is needed, government officials must untiringly seek generous donors where financial support from local and foreign companies is much needed. The presence of physical facilities are not enough. Aside from the Physical Education classes in schools that should be enhanced, there is a need to craft a well-designed curriculum where R/AP is creatively integrated. It is important to note that learning does not only happen inside the classroom. This is where outbound education comes into play. Students can learn and the same time do many forms of exercise through nature tripping and camping. Lastly, mental health is always connected with the problem of malnutrition. With this, parents must ensure that healthy foods, such as fruits, vegetables, low-fat fish, and so on, are provided and must also be available and affordable in schools.

Every child has the right to play and grow healthy in all aspects of their being. To achieve this, all stakeholders, such as the government, schools, religious groups, and other private organizations, must help and collaborate with one another for the sake of our young ones. There is an urgency to address the mental health crisis as experienced by children and promoting R/AP is an effective way of responding to it.

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