Taking Play Seriously NYT
By ROBIN MARANTZ HENIG

Educators fret that school officials are hacking away at recess to make room for an increasingly crammed curriculum. Psychologists complain that overscheduled kids have no time left for the real business of childhood: idle, creative, unstructured free play. Public health officials link insufficient playtime to a rise in childhood obesity. Parents bemoan the fact that kids don't play the way they themselves did — or think they did. And everyone seems to worry that without the chance to play stickball or hopscotch out on the street, to play with dolls on the kitchen floor or climb trees in the woods, today's children are missing out on something essential.

Stuart Brown, president of the National Institute for Play, was speaking at the New York Public Library's main branch on 42nd Street. He created the institute in 1996, after more than 20 years of psychiatric practice and research persuaded him of the dangerous long-term consequences of play deprivation.

Brown called play part of the ''developmental sequencing of becoming a human primate. If you look at what produces learning and memory and well-being, play is as fundamental as any other aspect of life, including sleep and dreams.''

one woman asked how her children will learn trust, empathy and social skills when their most frequent playing is done online.

But the growing science of play does have much to add to the conversation. Armed with research grounded in evolutionary biology and experimental neuroscience, some scientists have shown themselves eager — at times perhaps a little too eager — to promote a scientific argument for play. They have spent the past few decades learning how and why play evolved in animals, generating insights that can inform our understanding of its evolution in humans too. They are studying, from an evolutionary perspective, to what extent play is a luxury that can be dispensed with when there are too many other competing claims on the growing brain, and to what extent it is central to how that brain grows in the first place.

Scientists who study play, in animals and humans alike, are developing a consensus view that play is something more than a way for restless kids to work off steam; more than a way for chubby kids to burn off calories; more than a frivolous luxury. Play, in their view, is a central part of neurological growth and development — one important way that children build complex, skilled, responsive, socially adept and cognitively flexible brains.

apparently purposeless activity
play evolved because it is good preparation for adulthood.

occurs in a setting in which the animal is ''adequately fed, healthy and free from stress.'' That last part of the definition — that play requires that an animal be stress-free and

secure — suggests that play is the biological equivalent of a luxury item, the first thing to go when an animal or child is hungry or sick.

that play might be related to growth of the cerebellum, since they both peak at about the same time; that there is a sensitive period in brain growth, during which time it's important for an animal to get the brain-growth stimulation of play; and that the cerebellum needs the whole-body movements of play to achieve its ultimate configuration.

Maybe the idea that play is the best route to a whole host of good results — creativity, social agility, overall mental suppleness — is just the first idea scientists landed on, and they were inclined to accept it because it fit so well with their innate ideas about the nature of childhood.

Keeping play in perspective means looking at it not just clearly but fully. Not everything about childhood play is sweetness and light, no matter how much we romanticize it. Play can be dangerous or scary. It can be disturbing, destabilizing, aggressive. It can lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings, leaving children out of the charmed circle of the schoolyard. The other side of playing is teasing, bullying, scapegoating, excluding, hurting.

In the end, it comes down to a matter of trade-offs. There are only six hours in a school day, only another six or so till bedtime, and adults are forever trying to cram those hours with activities that are productive, educational and (almost as an afterthought) fun. Animal findings about how play influences brain growth suggest that playing, though it might look silly and purposeless, warrants a place in every child's day. Not too overblown a place, not too sanctimonious a place, but a place that embraces all styles of play and that recognizes play as every bit as essential to healthful neurological development as test-taking drills, Spanish lessons or Suzuki violin.