



**Maryville Daily Times, September 7, 2008**

## **The Power of Play**

Brenda-Lee Duarte, LPC, LifeLine Counseling Center

I grew up in your classic, idyllic neighborhood of the seventies. The one in which all parents were able to parent any child at any time, and were able to assign a chore to the nearest child. The kind of neighborhood that summer was for playing from ten in the morning until it was too dark to see at night. Catching lightning bugs and playing “Ghost in the Graveyard” happened well into the night because there was no concern for the safety of children out until all hours. After school meant riding bikes, playing team sports in which we made up the rules, swinging on grapevines, and digging for archeological finds in the most illogical places. We did not have cell phones, DVDs, or the internet, but our imaginations were tremendous and the possibilities were endless.

Play is a powerful vehicle through which children can make sense of their experience, master difficult life events, and build new ideas. Relentlessly provide your child with homework and structured activities and experts say you will be teaching him what to think. Leave plenty of room for self-directed play and unstructured time, and you will be teaching him *how* to think. It's in playing that we first learn to think for ourselves, and only in playing that we can truly be ourselves.

Following are some hints for allowing your child to play:

**Embrace the joy of goofing around.** If you live in an area where you can let your child run amok with his friends outdoors, let him or remember that just hanging with friends and neighbors indoors can be great too.

**Limit kids to one or two activities per season.** Kids may have lots of energy, but they get as tense as adults when they're overscheduled. One week of summer camp is sufficient.

**Encourage more human time, less screen and toy time.** Our children are spending larger chunks of time with stuff and less time with people. Even with something as simple as a car ride ... parents used to use car time to talk to their kids, and now the kids are watching DVDs in the backseat.

**Introduce computers with caution.** Balance in the amount of time that kids spend with the computer instead of outside in the fresh air is a necessity.

**Reclaim school breaks.** Children *and* parents need that hiatus to recharge. As a bonus, if you relax over the summer, you're going to be rejuvenated in time for back-to-school.

**Learn to trust your child.** This may be the most important parenting rule of all, children are self-directed learners — they are naturally curious — and the way they learn is through play.

Remember that with children all behavior is a message, and the only way for that message to come through loud and clear is to allow them ample time to play.