How Lack of Independent Play Is Impacting Children’s Mental Health

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JUANA SUMMERS, HOST:

We’ve been hearing a lot about the mental health crisis among children. Researchers have looked at a number of reasons, from social media use to isolation during the pandemic. But a recent commentary published in the Journal of Pediatrics looked at another factor – the decline of independent activity and play for children. Peter Gray is the lead author of that piece. For years, he’s been following the trend of declining mental health in kids and the declining levels of independent play. He joins us now. Welcome.

PETER GRAY: I’m very happy to be here.

SUMMERS: So, Peter, how is it that you and your co-author started to focus on the decline of independent play as a potential factor when it comes to the mental health crisis that we’re seeing among kids?

GRAY: Well, I’ve actually been studying play for many, many years and what play does for children, how children acquire confidence and abilities and make friends through play. And I’ve also, for a long time, been aware of the fact that over the past 50 to 70 years, there has been a continuous decline in children’s opportunities to play freely, away from adult intervention and control. So at some point, I began to put those findings together with the observation that, over this same period, the last 50 to 70 years – I mean, everybody is concerned about the most recent increase in anxiety, depression, even suicide among young people. But the mental health crisis really has long preceded COVID, and it has long preceded the internet.

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