Experts concerned about children's creative thinking

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By Karen MacPherson, Post-Gazette National Bureau

WASHINGTON -- As government leaders try to "institutionalize" imagination as an anti-terror tool, they face another, longer-term challenge: ensuring a future supply of creative thinkers.

In recent years, many child development experts have voiced increasing concern over the fact that children are accorded little time or encouragement to engage in imaginative play. Too many children are overscheduled with school and other activities, according to these experts.

Even sports, in which an adult sets the framework, leave little room for the development of creative thinking in children, these experts say.

When children do have time to play, they too often play with a pre-programmed electronic toy or sit in front of a screen -- television, computer or hand-held game -- responding to a scenario created by someone else, experts say.

As a result, children are developing a "problem-solving deficit disorder," says Diane Levin, a child development expert at Wheelock College in Boston. "Developing imagination and creativity is essential for children to develop problem-solving skills."

The vital need for such problem-solving skills as well as creative thinking was highlighted in the 9/11 Commission's recent final report. According to the commission, "the most important failure" leading to the terrorist attacks "was one of imagination."

Joan Almon, coordinator of the U.S. Alliance for Childhood, says she understands what an important role imagination can play -- even in a government bureaucracy. "As Albert Einstein once said: 'You can't solve a problem with the same thinking that created the problem,'" she said.

"Unfortunately, what we are doing today in education is de-emphasizing imagination. We are relying more and more on standardized tests, and we are emphasizing creativity less and less."

Sharna Olfman, a psychology professor at Pittsburgh's Point Park University who has studied children's imaginative play, noted that thousands of studies have established "incontrovertibly" that it is a catalyst for all kinds of healthy child development, including intellectually and emotionally. "Many of our greatest thinkers locate their capacity for original and profound thought in their imaginative abilities, first developed through creative play in early childhood," she said.

For example, "when asked how she came to discover properties of genes through her research with maize that her colleagues failed to discover, Nobel Prize-winning scientist Barbara McLintock spoke of her capacity to imagine herself inside the chromosomes she was studying," Olfman said.

She and other child-development experts urge parents to shut off access to "screens" and to push their children to engage in imaginative play, based on their own creative thinking. At first, it may be

hard, since many children aren't used to tapping into their imaginations, but parents should persist, the experts said. Otherwise, if their ability to think creatively isn't developed, children will mature into adults who lack the capacity to innovate -- in business, government or their own lives.

"I'm worrying that we are producing robots -- assembly-line citizens," Wheelock's Levin said.

This could presage a major problem for anti-terrorist efforts founded on the need for imaginative thinking, the experts said.

Even more than that, it could threaten the foundations of our democracy, contended the childhood alliance's Almon. "I think democracy really needs citizens who have imagination and creativity," she said. "Otherwise, the tendency is to let the government make decisions for us. Then you've got totalitarianism, not democracy."