

# Prescription for play: An interview with Angela Watts



Fadzai Manungo, MPH (c), University of Minnesota School of Public Health

Editor's Choice

Published November 30, 2018



*Figure 1: Angela Watts, Family Area Manager at Hennepin County Department of Public Health, September 25, 2018*

Angela Watts, the new Family Area Manager at Hennepin County Public Health is reshaping the way we think about child play. Yes, the good old-fashioned laser chasing, castle building, bubble blowing, ladder climbing, galaxy building, out of this world play. “We call them the seven powers of play and we’re always showing children their strength” she says. By ‘we,’ Watts is referring to her former colleagues at the Minnesota Children’s Museum where she served as the Director of Family Learning before joining Hennepin County. The Seven Powers of Play—creative thinking, critical thinking, self-control, confidence, collaboration, communication and coordination—were identified by researchers and early childhood development experts at the Minnesota Children’s Museum as essential skills that enable children to interact positively with others, manage their emotions and make sense of the world around them [1]. The video attached to this article highlights the work that childhood development experts at the Minnesota Children’s Museum are doing to advocate for and facilitate play amongst children and their families [2].

A clinical report published in *Pediatrics*, shows that lack of playtime is indeed a public health issue [3]. The report summarizes the neurological benefits of play on early

childhood brain development and the learning of pro-social behavior, especially for children experiencing trauma—it gives pediatricians the information they need to write prescriptions for play. In the digital world of television shows and electronic tablets, play has become less popular. A national survey of 8,950 preschool children and parents found that only 51% of children went outside to walk or play once per day with either parent [4]. According to the report, because of academic pressure, 30% of US kindergarten children no longer have recess and children 3 to 11 years of age have lost 12 hours per week of free time.

A study published in *Developmental Science* by Stanford researchers found significant differences in language processing skills and vocabulary at just 18 months of age between infants from poor and rich families [5]. The study is the first to identify an achievement gap in language processing skill at such a young age and suggests that disparities start to develop in the initial stages of life, setting children on trajectories that diminish their chances of academic success in adulthood. The consequences of these developmental differences are that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at higher risk of becoming adults with significantly lower memory, reasoning language and fluid intelligence than their economically advantaged peers [6]. Literacy skills greatly contribute to a young person’s sense of attachment to and success at school [7]. These findings have significance for minority youth for whom school may offer exposure to prosocial role models in the form of peer and teacher relationships as well as the opportunity to form trusting relationships with a caring adult—both of which may be absent in the youth’s life [8, 9]. There is therefore an unprecedented need to address disparities in cognitive processing through public health interventions targeted at early childhood development.

One physician who is making waves in Minneapolis as being one of the first physicians to write prescriptions for play is Watts’ long-time friend and colleague, Dr. Nate Chomilo, medical director of Reach Out and Read

Minnesota. Dr. Chomilo recently sat down for an interview with Kare 11 to talk about his upcoming pilot project with the Minnesota Children's Museum to promote the power of play [10]. Since the museum's grand re-opening in June 2017, featuring 10 new galleries that prioritize the powers of play, families of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds have swarmed in to experience the magical power of play. The location of the museum in St Paul's charming downtown area and just a couple of blocks from the Metro light rail, makes it easily accessible to inner city and suburban children alike.

Watts attributes her motivation for childhood development to her cheerful upbringing in Missouri, in a community that she lovingly describes as diverse and vibrant but not without its shortcomings. "My culture was celebrated, who I was as a child was celebrated. I knew things weren't equitable but it's really when I moved to Minnesota for an employment opportunity that I realized how bad disparities really are. As a problem solver, something had to be done," Watts adds. Indeed, she aims to bring her problem-solving skills to Hennepin County Public Health, where she will oversee maternal child health, early childhood screening, the Follow Along program, home visiting programs, the Women Infants and Children (WIC) program, child and teen checkups, adolescent health programs, and Better Together Hennepin: teen pregnancy prevention. Part of her strategy for fiscal year 2019 is to partner with non-traditional allies and leverage community knowledge in designing low cost interventions that target the barriers to maternal child health. "It comes down to our policies, policies around breastfeeding, policies around paid leave and giving parents the time and resources that they need to be able to nurture their children," she says enthusiastically.

Her parting words to our Public Health Review readers, and more specifically to public health students, is to immerse oneself in the lived experience of the community you are trying to impact. "Being out in the communities and working with families is my classroom." She attributes her success in engaging communities to her ability to listen and not portray herself as the expert, adding that data and figures only paint part of the picture and that community voices are an invaluable piece to all public health work.

## Author Contact Information

Fadzai Manungo: [manun003@umn.edu](mailto:manun003@umn.edu)

## References

- [1] Minnesota Children's Museum. *Seven powers of play*. Retrieved September 25, 2018, from <https://mcm.org/parent-resources/7cs/>
- [2] Finn, C. [Minnesota Children's Museum]. (2018, June 14). *Powers of play* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWkOCWGfs9I&feature=share>
- [3] Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Committee on psychosocial aspects of child and family health. (2018). The power of play: a pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*. doi: 10.1542/peds.2018-2058
- [4] Tandon, P. S., Zhou, C., & Christakis, D. A. (2012). Frequency of parent-supervised outdoor play of US preschool-aged children. *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 166(8), 707-712.
- [5] Fernald, A., Marchman, V. A., & Weisleder, A. (2013). SES differences in language processing skill and vocabulary are evident at 18 months. *Developmental Science* 16(2), 234-248.
- [6] Salthouse, T. A. (1996). The processing-speed theory of adult age differences in cognition. *Psychological Review* 103(3), 403.
- [7] Naylor, M. W., Staskowski, M., Kenney, M. C., & King, C. A. (1994). Language disorders and learning disabilities in school-refusing adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 33(9), 1331-1337.
- [8] Smart, D., Vassallo, S., Sanson, A., Richardson, N., Dussuyer, I., McKendry, B., & Oberklaid, F. (2003). *Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour: types, resiliency and environmental influences*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- [9] Snow, P., & Powell, M. (2004). Developmental language disorders and adolescent risk: a public-health advocacy role for speech pathologists? *Advances in Speech Language Pathology* 6(4), 221-229.
- [10] Hrapsky, C. (2018, September 03). *A new pilot promoting the power of playtime*. Retrieved September 25, 2018, from <https://www.kare11.com/article/news/a-new-pilot-promoting-the-power-of-playtime/89-590571644>