

# WE'RE IN A YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AND THE TOY & GAME INDUSTRY NEEDS TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

**Rachele Harmuth**, Head of ThinkFun, Ravensburger North America, Inc.

**Deborah Gilboa, MD**, Clinical Associate Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Resilience Expert



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The challenge:

There is a well-documented mental health crisis among children and teens.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, but in October of 2021 the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry declared a national state of emergency in children's mental health. In these organizations' combined 125 years of existence, this has never happened before.

## The need:

Methods to help children develop MESH (Mental, Emotional and Social Health) skills to protect them from the risky behaviors and self-harm that are too often the result of their mental distress.

## These skills include:

- Problem solving
- Perseverance
- Adaptation
- Conflict resolution
- Self-regulation
- Self-advocacy
- Cognitive skills
- Communication strategies

## The solution:

Every stakeholder in the games and toys industry - inventors, manufacturers, retailers - has a crucial role to play in protecting the mental health of children through the development of MESH skills.

### Parents and educators need games and toys that:

**Focus on problem solving and perseverance.**

**Encourage storytelling.**

**Present new or increasing challenges over the duration of play.**

**Draw children and their adults to play together.**

There are steps every member of our industry can take right now to strengthen and protect children, and we must, for their safety and our future.





# KIDS TODAY ARE FACING INCREASING MENTAL DISTRESS.



“ **Play is one of the best ways to promote safety in kids’ mental health when it’s used to teach the skills they need to recognize, respond to and learn from their emotions.** ”

**Abigail Schlesinger, MD**

Clinical Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Integrated Care  
Western Psychiatric Hospital and Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh

According to the Pew Trust Research Center’s expert, “Nearly every child in the country is suffering to some degree from the psychological effects of the pandemic. Suddenly everyone is talking about mental health. Parents, teachers and students are openly discussing it.”

**71%**

71% of parents believe the pandemic has taken a toll on their child’s mental health.

**67%**

67% wish they’d been more vigilant about their child’s mental health from the beginning.

Furthermore, the evidence shows that this is not solely due to the pandemic and is likely to continue long past.

# ARE KIDS OKAY? THEY'RE STRUGGLING.



Last school year, mental health–related emergency department visits increased 24% for children ages 5 to 11 and 31% for those ages 12 to 17 over the year before.

## 44%

44% of all teenagers reported feeling “sad or hopeless” in the past year.

## 50%

Suicide attempts have increased by more than 50% in adolescent girls just in the past two years.

These numbers far exceed the 18% of young people known to have chronic mental illness. There is a fundamental struggle our kids are experiencing right now. **They are not OK.**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, but in October of 2021 the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry declared a national state of emergency in children’s mental health. In these organizations’ combined 125 years of existence, this has never happened before. New draft recommendations from the United States Preventive Services Task Force (the national gold standard for physicians) states all kids 8 years old and above should be screened for anxiety. Parents and educators are overwhelmed by worry about the mental health of children.

# CAN KIDS BUILD THEIR MENTAL HEALTH? ABSOLUTELY YES!

Current research provides encouraging news on how to improve kids' mental health.

The US Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health urges adults to empower youth and their families to recognize, manage, and learn from difficult emotions. For youth, this includes building strong relationships with peers and supportive adults, practicing techniques to solve problems and manage emotions, and seek help.

**These skills have been identified that protect children and teenagers from suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviors:**

<b>Problem solving</b>	<b>Perseverance</b>
<b>Adaptation</b>	<b>Conflict resolution</b>
<b>Self-regulation</b>	<b>Self-advocacy</b>
<b>Cognitive skills</b>	<b>Communication strategies</b>

These skills, called SEL (Social Emotional Learning) or MESH (Mental, Emotional and Social Health) are at the core of community and school-based initiatives in almost every developed country, including \$190 billion dollars of health and education funding in the next four years in the United States alone.

**MESH skills teach children how to:**

**1 Identify and overcome obstacles.**

**2 Explain what they're experiencing - to themselves and to others.**

**3 Ask for help when they're stuck.**

Learning these skills and practicing them not only decreases self-harm during periods of mental distress, it also decreases suicidal thoughts, reduces hopelessness, and decreases anxiety.

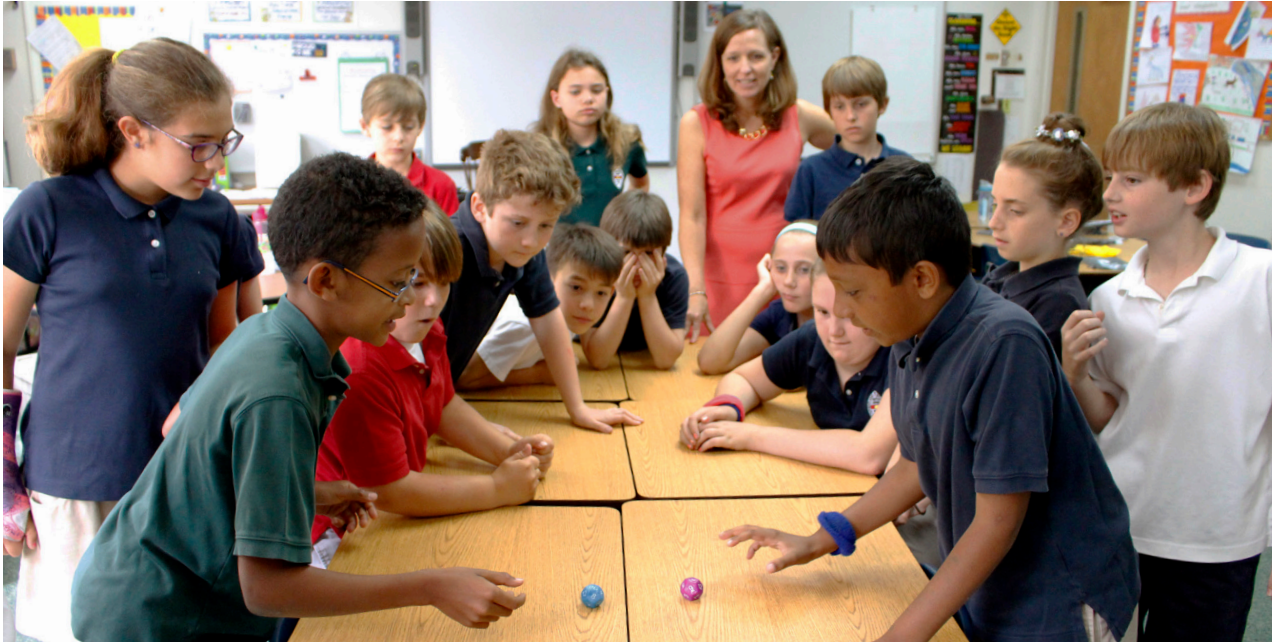
“**Activities intentionally designed to compliment MESH attributes help build resilience, self-esteem, and self-confidence in children and teens.**”

**Tom Rosenberg**

President and Chief Executive Officer  
at American Camp Association Inc.



# WHAT DO PARENTS AND EDUCATORS WANT? SUPPORT AND TOOLS TO HELP THEIR KIDS.



“ **Educators are seeing more behavioral and mental health issues in the classroom, but are not equipped to solve these issues with the resources they have. Parents have a desperate need for tools that will help them strengthen their children, and educators need kids to learn to handle progressive challenges and build resilience skills outside the classroom.** ”

**Kelly Williams**

Co-Founder and Vice-President,  
PIRI - Learning & the Brain

Parents are rapidly shifting their definition of “success” in their children’s lives, and their priorities are shifting with that definition.

Educators have known since 1989 that mental health challenges in childhood and adolescence can also be associated with reduced high school graduation rates and challenges attending and completing postsecondary education. They’ve been implementing SEL curricula that teach MESH skills for almost a decade in North America, but are constantly aware of the limitations of this being only a school-based initiative. Educators want kids to work on MESH every day!

Parents are spending ever-increasing time and resources trying to figure out if their kids are fundamentally ok, and how to keep them that way. Online searches for terms like “protect children mental health” have increased more than 100 fold since early 2020. Furthermore, 66% of adults assert that parenting was even more stressful in 2021 than in the year previous.

**Parents want help protecting their kids.**

# DOES PLAY OFFER THE SOLUTION? YES!



The American Academy of Pediatrics demonstrates that play is essential; building MESH skills including but not limited to: empathy, healthy relationships, survival skills and self-regulation. Play, defined as an experience that is intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery. Play protects children's mental health not only during play, but for years after by building cognitive skills they will benefit from lifelong. Play is so crucial to the positive development of a child's mental health that the United Nations Human Rights Commission has deemed it a human right of every child worldwide.

“ Putting toys and games in the hands of parents that build MESH skills will provide a tool for them to teach these valuable skills. Having toys and games that address these skills gives parents the support strategies and creative ideas to teach them openly and to work on them together with their children. ”

**Jen Hartstein, PsyD**

Child and Adolescent Psychologist

Founder, Hartstein Psychologic Services

# CAN THE TOY & GAME INDUSTRY IMPACT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF KIDS?

## YES, AND WE MUST.

By the nature of what we do we are uniquely positioned to positively impact children's and parents' lives by creating products that build MESH skills.

Every stakeholder in the games and toys industry - inventors, manufacturers, retailers - has a crucial role to play in protecting the mental health of children through the development of MESH skills.

The top reason parents give for purchasing recreational activities for their children is to promote that child's healthy development. 87% of parents are spending more quality time with their children than before the pandemic, and more than half of parents cite "fun activities and hobbies" as their primary method of bolstering their child's mental health.

“**Parents need tools that will help build mental, emotional and social health in their children. Toys and games can be a powerful way to build these skills in children.**”

**Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D.**

New York Times Bestselling author  
of *The Whole-Brain Child*  
Founder/Executive Director The Center  
for Connection and Play Strong Institute

**Many toys and games offer the MESH journey children need to strengthen their mental health when they:**

**Focus on problem solving and perseverance. These develop children's ability to identify and overcome obstacles.**

**Encourage storytelling. These build children's self-advocacy, meaning their ability to explain what they're experiencing to themselves and to others, growing their self-regulation skills in the process.**

**Present new or increasing challenges over the duration of play. These strengthen children's adaptation and cognitive skills and motivates them to determine when to seek assistance.**

**Draw children and their adults to play together.**

These improve communication skills and conflict resolution and strengthen their most supportive relationships.



# WHAT CAN WE DO? START WITH FIVE STEPS.

**1**

**Understand the mental health obstacles children and their adults face.**

**2**

**Show empathy and attention to these concerns in our outreach to parents and educators.**

**3**

**Design toys and games that emphasize MESH skill building.**

**4**

**Demonstrate and communicate the MESH value of our toys and games.**

**5**

**Create changes at the individual, family, school and community levels to offer more opportunities to children for play.**

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Youth mental health in the spotlight again, as pandemic drags on.” Statistics Canada. May 6 2022. Statistical Information Service of Canada. [www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/907-youth-mental-health-spotlight-again-pandemicdrags](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/907-youth-mental-health-spotlight-again-pandemicdrags). June 7 2022.

Vestal, Christine. “COVID Harmed Kids’ Mental Health—And Schools Are Feeling It.” Stateline Article. Nov 9 2021. The Pew Charitable Trusts. [www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/11/08/covid-harmed-kids-mental-health-and-schools-are-feeling-it](http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/11/08/covid-harmed-kids-mental-health-and-schools-are-feeling-it). May 30 2022.

“Children’s Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Lurie Children’s. May 27 2021. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago. [www.luriechildrens.org/en/blog/childrens-mental-health-pandemic-statistics/](http://www.luriechildrens.org/en/blog/childrens-mental-health-pandemic-statistics/). May 31 2022.

Warner, Judith. “We Have Essentially Turned a Blind Eye to Our Own Children for Decades.” The Washington Post. Mar 21 2022. [www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/03/21/childrens-mental-health-crisis-politicization/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/03/21/childrens-mental-health-crisis-politicization/). Mar 21 2022.

Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental Health–Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States. MMWR Morbidity Mortality Weekly Report 2020;69:1675–1680. [dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3](https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3). May 30 2022.

“New CDC data illuminate youth mental health threats during the COVID-19 pandemic.” CDC Newsroom Releases. Mar 31 2022. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html](http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/p0331-youth-mental-health-covid-19.html).

“Protecting Youth and Mental Health.” U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory. Dec 7 2021. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Pp6-12, 16-19. [www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf](http://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf). Jun 1 2022.

Prinstein, M, Ethier, K. “Science Shows How to Protect Kids’ Mental Health but it’s being Ignored.” Scientific American. May 31, 2022. [www.scientificamerican.com/article/science-shows-how-to-protect-kids-mental-health-but-its-being-ignored/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/science-shows-how-to-protect-kids-mental-health-but-its-being-ignored/). May 31 2022.

“AAP and AACAP Declare National emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health.” American Academy of Pediatrics. Oct 19 2021. [www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aapaacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/](http://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aapaacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/). Jun 2 2022

“Anxiety in Children and Adolescents: Screening.” Draft Recommendation Statement. Apr 12 2022. United States Preventive Service. [www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/draft-recommendation/screening-anxiety-children-adolescents](http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/draft-recommendation/screening-anxiety-children-adolescents). May 25 2022.

Elizalde, Elizabeth. “Top Things Parents Want to See Change in 2022.” Parenting Research. Jan 4 2022. SWNS Media Group. [www.swnsdigital.com/us/2021/12/top-things-parents-want-to-see-change-in-2022/](http://www.swnsdigital.com/us/2021/12/top-things-parents-want-to-see-change-in-2022/). May 29 2022.

“Preventing Youth Suicide: Tips for Parents & Educators.” Resources and Publications. Jan 1 2015. National Association of School Psychologists. [www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/preventing-youth-suicide/preventing-youth-suicide-tips-for-parents-and-educators](http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/preventing-youth-suicide/preventing-youth-suicide-tips-for-parents-and-educators). Jun 8 2022.

“Social-Emotional Learning and Preventing Youth Suicide.” Policy Advocacy. Jan 1 2019. Committee for Children. Pp 12-13. [www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/policy-advocacy/sel-youth-suicide-prevention.pdf](http://www.cfchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/policy-advocacy/sel-youth-suicide-prevention.pdf). Jun 2 2022.

“Mental, Emotional and Social Health, Kindergarten to Grade 3.” California Health Education. Orange County Department of Education and California Department of Education. [www.californiahealtheducation.org/Pages/K-3-Mental-Emotional-Social-Health.aspx](http://www.californiahealtheducation.org/Pages/K-3-Mental-Emotional-Social-Health.aspx). May 30 2022.

“Benefits of Camp Programs for Mental, Emotional and Social Health (MESH).” Mental Health Resources - COVID-19. Jul 1 2018. American Camps Association. [www.acacamps.org/resource-library/coronavirus/mental-health-resources](http://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/coronavirus/mental-health-resources). May 27 2022.

“NAMI Poll: Parents Want Mental Health Education in Schools, Mental Health Days Off for Students.” Poll of Parents. Dec 15 2021. National Alliance on Mental Illness. [www.nami.org/Press-Media/Press-Releases/2021/NAMI-Poll-Parents-Want-Mental-Health-Education-in-Schools-Mental-Health-Days-Off-for-Students](http://www.nami.org/Press-Media/Press-Releases/2021/NAMI-Poll-Parents-Want-Mental-Health-Education-in-Schools-Mental-Health-Days-Off-for-Students). Jun 8 2022.

Houri A, Kincade L. “The Connection Between Mental Health and Academic Success.” Groves Learning Organization. Apr 15 2021. [www.groveslearning.org/connection-between-mental-health-academic-success/](http://www.groveslearning.org/connection-between-mental-health-academic-success/). Jun 7 2022.

Shafer, Leah. “What Makes SEL Work?” Usable Knowledge. Jul 15 2016. Harvard Graduate School of Education. [www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/07/what-makes-sel-work](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/07/what-makes-sel-work). Jun 1 2022.

Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, Hirsh-Pasek K, Golinkoff, R. “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children.” *Pediatrics* (2018) 142 (3): e20182058. [doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058). May 30 2022.

Henderson TZ, Atencio DJ. Integration of play, learning, and experience: what museums afford young visitors. *Early Child Educ J.* 2007;35(3):245–251 [www.researchgate.net/publication/226775587\\_Integration\\_of\\_Play\\_Learning\\_and\\_Experience\\_What\\_Museums\\_Afford\\_Young\\_Visitors](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/226775587_Integration_of_Play_Learning_and_Experience_What_Museums_Afford_Young_Visitors). Jun 8 2022.

“Convention on the Rights of the Child.” General Assembly resolution 44/25. Nov 20 1989. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. [www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child](http://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child). Jun 1 2022.

“Five Key Reasons Why Parents Buy Toys.” *Toy Industry Journal*. [www.toyindustryjournal.com/5-key-reasons-why-parents-buy-toys/](http://www.toyindustryjournal.com/5-key-reasons-why-parents-buy-toys/). Jun 8 2022.



## SIDEBAR SUPPORTING QUOTES:

### **Abigail Schlesinger, MD**

Clinical Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Integrated Care Western Psychiatric Hospital and Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh

### **Tina Payne-Bryson, PhD**

Author & Founder/Executive Director  
The Center for Connection and Play Strong Institute

### **Tom Rosenberg**

President and Chief Executive Officer at American Camp Association Inc.

### **Kelly Williams**

Co-Founder and Vice-President, PIRI - Learning & the Brain

### **Jen Hartstein, PsyD**

Founder, Hartstein Psychologic Services



### **Rachele Harmuth**

Rachele Harmuth is the Head of ThinkFun, a division of Ravensburger. Her 'official' toy industry career began at 18 when she incorporated a company just to be able to go to New York Toy Fair. Graduating from Carnegie Mellon University a few years later with a degree in Industrial Design, she started designing toys professionally. Throughout her 30 years in the industry, she has been involved in design, marketing, brand management, sales, and strategic planning with such brands as K'NEX, Klutz, Scholastic, Fat Brain Toys, and of course, ThinkFun. She is known in the industry for her enthusiasm and passion for great products that make an impact on kids' lives. When she's not making toys, she's setting up treasure hunts, running cardboard boat races, and looking for ways to add fun to the world with her 3 kids.



### **Dr. Deborah Gilboa**

Resilience expert Deborah Gilboa, MD, aka "Dr. G" works with families, organizations, and businesses to identify the mindset and strategies to turn stress to an advantage. Dr. G is a leading media personality seen regularly on TODAY, The Rachael Ray Show and Good Morning America and is the Resilience Expert for The Doctors. She is also featured frequently in the Washington Post, The New York Times, Forbes, and countless other digital and print outlets. Dr. G is board certified attending Family Physician and is fluent in American Sign Language. In addition to being a graduate of University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine (where she is also a Clinical Associate Professor) and Carnegie Mellon University, she is an alumna of Chicago's Second City Improv Theater. Her diverse background and experiences add to her credibility and lively storytelling. Dr. G is the proud mom of 4 sons who all LOVE to play, as well as aunt to more than a dozen nieces and nephews, from whom she learns so much.

**For more information or to join the conversation; visit:**

**MESH**helps.org

ThinkFun, a Ravensburger North America company

©2022 Ravensburger North America, Inc.