



The Value of Play



What is play and why is it important?

From earliest infancy, play is the primary way children learn. Through play, children eagerly use all the “tools” they have at their disposal—their bodies, their relationships with their family and peers, and the world around them. Play, more than any other activity, fuels healthy development of young children. It is through play that much of children’s early learning is achieved.

Children play because it is fun. Play takes many forms, but the heart of play is pleasure. And with pleasure comes the powerful drive to repeat such activities. With repetition comes mastery. And mastery brings a sense of accomplishment and confidence.

Types and stages of play

Children engage in different types of play depending upon circumstances and particular needs. Types of play include:

- **Solitary**—children playing alone and independently, following their own interests without reference to others.
- **Onlooker**—children who watch other children playing, ask questions and make suggestions, but do not enter into the play.
- **Parallel**—children playing the same activity or with similar materials beside each other, but not talking or interacting with one another.
- **Associative**—children playing with each other, sharing similar materials and activities in an unorganized way.
- **Cooperative**—children working together and interacting, to play or create something in an organized and purposeful way.

There are also stages of complexity of play. The first stage of play is simple sensory exploration and

manipulation of the play material, such as scribbling with crayons, pouring water and sand, or ringing a bell. As children begin to transform and invent objects and rules, they are engaged in symbolic play. For instance, a child may cross two blocks to make the letter “T” or offer playdough “tortillas” to another child. As children become more proficient with language, they begin to substitute words for actions and materials. They play cooperatively and become interested in formal games with peers.

How does play help children grow?

Children’s cognitive skills are enhanced. Through play children learn about concepts, how to group and classify objects, how to make sense of things and events, and how to solve problems. Play often involves trial and error, and problem-solving tasks. Play requires a child to make choices, direct activities, and make plans to reach a goal.

Children develop motor skills. Through play, children develop control and coordination of muscles that are needed to walk, kick, eat or write. Gross motor skills can be enhanced when a toddler pushes a toy grocery cart or an older child plays hopscotch. Fine motor and manipulation skills are developed when preschoolers use their fingers to string cheerios for a necklace or toddlers scribble with a crayon on paper. When throwing and catching a ball, children are practicing hand-eye coordination and their ability to grasp. When children kick a ball across the room, they are practicing coordination and developing large muscle control, tone and flexibility.

Children enhance language skills. Talking, singing, rhyming, and word play help them to master the rules and sounds of language while they have fun.

Children gain social and emotional skills. Play develops imagination and creativity and gives

children practice in social skills such as waiting, negotiating, taking turns, cooperation, compromise, sharing and expressing emotions. As children learn about themselves and the world, they acquire self-confidence, self-reliance and self-expression.

Tips for encouraging play

- Allow children plenty of time and opportunities for both free and directed play. Avoid offering play as a reward.
- Respect that children have their own unique and individual styles and approaches to learning and playing.
- Allow children plenty of room for safe exploration and play with limited restrictions. Arrange definite play spaces both inside and outside.
- Provide a variety of interesting and safe materials and activities ranging from simple to complex: toys, art and writing supplies, books, musical instruments, dress-up clothes, puzzles, games. Play materials do not have to be elaborate or expensive, but they need to be developmentally appropriate (interesting and challenging but not too difficult).
- Avoid overstimulating children, particularly infants. Infants will signal when they have had enough stimulation by crying or looking away.
- Give children clear limits through what you say, how you arrange the room and what materials you make available to them.
- Provide space for children to play quietly and privately away from noisier activities. The area should include a rug or carpet, soft pillows, child-sized upholstered furniture, etc.
- Rotate toys and materials regularly to keep children interested.
- Observe children and listen quietly as they play. Notice their likes, dislikes and interests. Pay attention to toys and materials that encourage use of the imagination. Scaled-down adult objects are often good toys for children.
- Encourage children to talk about what they are doing and how they feel. Introduce new words to expand their vocabulary. Document and take dictation of what they say.
- Get down on the children's level and join in their play occasionally. Respond to their play

with encouragement as a way to help them take pride in their play and motivate them to play more. Never make fun of children's play.

- Share with parents/families what you notice about their child's play.
- Encourage parents to dress children in washable clothes and sturdy shoes.

Safety first

It is important to follow basic safety guidelines to reduce the chance that children will be injured during play. This includes providing children with access to safe toys, materials and environments. The following documents from the California Childcare Health Program can assist you:

- Indoor and Outdoor Environments Safety Checklist
- Possible Choking and Suffocation Hazards Poster
- Safe Playground Habits Poster
- Toy Safety Checklist

Resources

ZERO TO THREE: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families has several documents on tips about play for families and caregivers to download or order, including *The Power of Play—Learning Through Play from Birth to Three*. Available online at www.zerotothree.org/play/more.html

Playing for Keeps has compiled a recommended list of books about play, ranging from theory, suggested play activities, children's stories about play, early childhood educators and parenting resources, etc. Available online at: http://playingforkeeps.org/site/library_01.html

Segal, M. (1998). *Your Child at Play: Birth to One Year*. 2nd ed. Your Child at Play Series [also available: *One to Two; Two to Three Years; Three to Five Years; Five to Eight Years*.] New York: Newmarket Press.

References

Perry, B., Hogan, L., Marlin, S. *Curiosity, Pleasure and Play: A Neurodevelopmental Perspective*. Haaeyc Advocate, June 15, 2000. www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/Curiosity.asp.

Koralek, D. (2004). *Spotlight on Young Children and Play*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. Washington, D.C.

by Mardi Lucich, MA (July 2004)