

Play

What is Play?

“Go out and play” was probably some of the best advice you ever got from your parents. Most children are as comfortable playing as fish are in water – but scientists have actually been studying play since the early 1900s and we now know that childhood play has a big role in children’s brain development.

Babies are aware of their surroundings and are ready to learn and interact from the day they are born. Much of their interaction comes in the form of play. In fact, the ability to love and trust are created through interactions with others, especially during playtime.

For babies, play may just be a simple game of “peek-a-boo” with mom or dad. For toddlers and preschoolers, play becomes an exciting adventure on a playground or in the backyard. While the types of play evolve as a child grows, research tells us that for every age, when children are playing, they are learning.

Why Play Matters

Play matters because it allows children to develop essential physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills.

During play, a child’s brain takes in information using all five senses, creating and responding to sound, sight, touch, taste, and smell. These combine to create connections in the brain that create the foundation for future learning and development.

One way to understand why play matters is to consider these common myths about play:

- ★ Play wastes time and prevents learning.
 - In fact, play is a fundamental tool for helping children understand their environment and relationships.
- ★ Play is really nothing more than fun and games.
 - Yes, it’s fun...but play is also the ideal environment for helping children understand how to live happy, healthy lives.

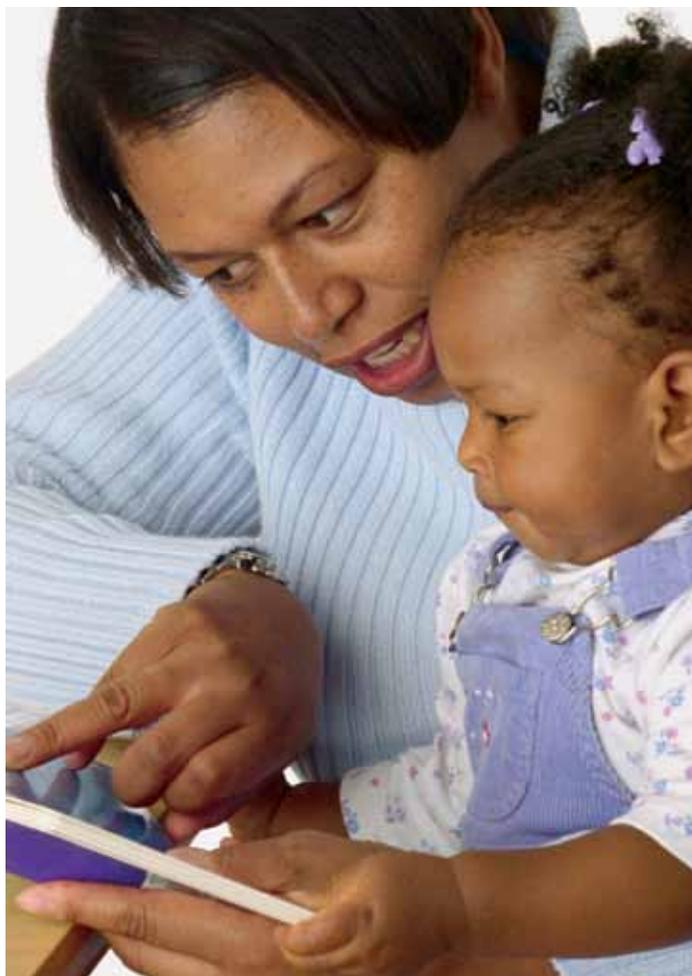


- ★ Play isn’t important until children are older.
 - Play actually helps infants build strong bonds with caregivers – and even simple games like peek-a-boo stimulate a baby’s brain and help it develop.
- ★ Children only benefit from structured play directed by adults.
 - There is a role for structured play – but unstructured, independent play is important too; it helps children discover their own interests and develop imagination.

Six Types of Play

Researchers have identified at least six different types of play. Most children enjoy a variety of types of play. Engaging in all of types of play is healthy for children, and there are opportunities for all of them in the daily life.

- 1. Solitary, or Independent Play.** When a child plays alone, she learns to concentrate, think by herself, comes up with creative ideas, and regulate emotions. All of these are important things for a child to learn. Playing independently is important and normal.
- 2. Parallel Play** involves a child playing alongside – but not really with -- other children. If you watch, you will notice that there is no formal interaction, but the children are often playing with the same toys and engaged in a similar activity. This type of play is very common for children from 1-3 years of age. Parallel play is very important as it teaches children peer regulation, observation skills, how to get along with others, as well as ways to work independently.
- 3. Cooperative Play** is a more organized kind of play. The child plays as part of a larger group that has a collective goal such as making an art project or putting on a skit. During cooperative play, the role of leader and follower are often visible.



- 4. Skill Mastery Play** occurs when a child is learning to do something new. Often, she uses trial and error to repeat the same skill over and over. Skill mastery play is common when learning to throw a ball, ride a bike, swim, or swing independently.
- 5. Sensory Motor Play** occurs when children use their five senses and their motor skills. You might see this when a baby is less interested in what an object does than what it feels like, sounds like, or tastes like. For toddlers and preschoolers, a great example of sensory motor play is playing with sand, mud, water or clay.
- 6. Rough and Tumble Play** is when children engage in activities with intensity and energy. For example, the game might start with tag and quickly become tackle or wrestling. This type of play does not have to be physical but it does change pace quickly and involve something unexpected. Dads are often more likely to engage in rough and tumble play.

What Parents Can Do

As a parent, you want your child to experience, to explore and to learn. To do this, let your child play! Here are a few helpful hints as you enter their world of play.

- ★ **Repetition may be boring to you, but it's not to your child.** Children learn by repeating. Let your child play the same game or play with the same toy over and over. They will move on when they are ready.
- ★ **Make time for play!** Many parents think that they have to teach through lessons or classes. Often, the best learning takes place during play.
- ★ **Get involved!** Become part of their game rather than trying to lead the way. Let them make the rules.
- ★ **Let your child take the lead.** Playing works best when you respond to your child's cues and follow their lead.
- ★ **Let your child determine the pace of play.** The best way to teach a new skill is to show your child how something works, then step back and give them a chance to try.
- ★ **Don't force or prolong play.** When your child is tired of an activity, it's time to move on.
- ★ **Consider safety.** Help your child understand any safety rules for play and be sure children are supervised. There is nothing that ruins a good play environment faster than a child getting hurt.
- ★ **Make an area safe for children to play.** Move small or breakable objects out of reach and take safety precautions. When you child-proof an area, you are giving your child permission to move and play freely.