



# Young Children and the Importance of Play

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Play is not just fun for children – it is *fundamental*! Play is a key to a child’s learning and development. Parents are often their child’s first play companion, so understanding play and its value to children is helpful. What are some of the primary purposes of a child’s play and why is it important?

## The Stages and Purposes of Play

A wooden truck, a baby doll, a floppy hat, a ball – what do these items have in common? They are the tools of play for young children. However, all of these toys, and play activities in general, provide more than fun. They open the door to opportunities for learning. In fact, child development research suggests that *for young children, each play activity or interaction is an opportunity for learning and growth.*

Often people think that children are “just playing” and do not see any real value in play activities. Some people wonder why children and adults spend time in play at all. In fact, these types of activities are what children are supposed to be doing. Play is a child’s work. It is fun but it also pays big developmental dividends. Play is critically important to a child’s development and learning. Research indicates that young children learn best in an atmosphere that encourages exploration, discovery and play.

So, then, what exactly is “play”? It has been defined in a variety of ways, but generally includes an activity that is valued or enjoyed by the child, is self-motivated, is freely

chosen or encouraged, is engaging and holds interest, and allows a child to learn about and make connections to the world around him or her.

Play activities can vary widely and might include active or thoughtful movement (for example, pretending to be a butterfly), imitating a person or role (for example, acting like a clown or playing house), using play materials or equipment (for example, stacking up blocks), engaging in an activity for amusement or recreation (for example, playing a game of tag), acting in a fun manner (for example, singing a silly song) or participating in a game’s actions (for example, doing a board game).

- “Play is important for children of all abilities because it lays the foundation for reading, writing, mathematical reasoning and creativity.”

– Beth Boosalis Davis,  
executive director,  
National Lekotek Center

- “Making believe and pretending are among the wonders of the human experience.”

– Dorothy G. Singer, Ed. D.,  
early childhood education expert

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## Stages of Play

As young children grow from infancy through toddlerhood and into their school-age years, they move through stages of play that are increasingly involved and

complicated. Although the types of play change and become more complex as a child grows, children often engage in various types of play at different ages. Adults should not overly worry if a child engages in

play that is not “on time” for his or her age. Mildred Parten, one of the earliest scholars to define play among children, noted that stages of play typically evolve through five types of play as young children grow.

### Five Stages of Play

- **Onlooker Behavior (very young children)** – Playing passively by watching or conversing with other children engaged in play activities of some kind.
- **Solitary Play (very young children)** – Playing alone or with little reference to what other children nearby are doing. Little awareness of what is going on with others, but focused on their individual play activity or toys.
- **Parallel Play (2 to 3 years old)** – Playing beside, but not with, another child. May be in the middle of a group but the child remains focused on his or her own play activity. In parallel play, children may be using similar toys or use each other’s toys, but while aware of children next to them, they play independently and have little interaction with other children.
- **Associative Play (3 to 4½ years old)** – Playing together but not going toward a common goal or focused on a common interest. Both children may be in the sand box with trucks and talking about what they are doing, but each child still works independently or has a separate story occurring.
- **Cooperative Play (4 to 6 years old)** – Playing and working together to reach a common goal. For example, if children are building with blocks and adding to the structure to build a house, they may talk about what will happen after the house is built and each takes on a role to fulfill his or her plans. In cooperative play, children organize themselves and others into roles with specific goals in mind (for example, to assign roles of cook, waiter or server in a restaurant).

### Children at Play – A Learning Activity

Play is fun for children, but play is also important to children’s development and learning for a variety of reasons. To begin thinking about this, list an example of a play activity that you recently engaged in with a child:

#### Recent Play Activity

- (Example: Bouncing a baby on my knee and playing “patty cake.”)
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Now consider what skills may have been learned through the play activity you have listed. In the table below, list an example of something a child may have learned for each area of development. Development of knowledge and skills in each of these areas supplies the reasons why play is so important – besides the fact that it is just fun!

Area of Development	Example of Skill Learned	Personal Example
Physical Skills	<i>Balance; hand-eye coordination</i>	
Cognitive Skills	<i>Building memory</i>	
Language Skills	<i>Rehearsal of language; rhythm</i>	
Social Skills	<i>Face-to-face interaction</i>	
Emotional and Moral Skills	<i>Enjoyment; exchanging emotions</i>	
Creative Skills	<i>Engaging in play games with adults</i>	

## Purposes of Play

Through play, children are able to learn and develop in many different ways. Play contributes to children's development by helping them gain confidence and mastery, giving them learning opportunities and allowing them to interact with the world.

- **Children acquire, practice and master skills.** Through practice and mastery of challenges in play, such as kicking a ball, children gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. Confidence leads to further exploration by children and acquisition of new skills, which in turn leads to more practice and mastery. It is a cycle that continues through life and leads to further learning.
- **Children encounter learning opportunities and learn both concrete and abstract concepts.** All play activities provide many opportunities for learning. For instance, the play dough that you may give a child helps a child gain:
  - Language skills – by discussing what they are doing with the play dough
  - Small-muscle control – squeezing or shaping the play dough helps the muscles in children's fingers and hands get stronger, and this leads to being able to control a pencil for writing or scissors for cutting
  - Social skills – Sharing tools, working beside someone else and commenting on another's work
  - Abstract thinking ability – making a figure from play dough can represent a – (*snowman*) \_\_\_\_\_, and being able to shape something from play dough requires complex thinking skills and abilities

– Cognitive concepts – color, texture, volume, math skills (for example, taking some away, adding it somewhere else)

- **Children build positive connections with adults through interactions that occur during play activities.** Connectedness to caring adults is one of the most important predictors of a child's well-being. Young children form positive connections through play as they engage in interactive activities such as playing tag or ball. Also, recreational time together in sports activities, time together at the park, and educational activities such as board games or puzzles, allow play time to become connection time.
- **Children gain a sense of order and control over their expanding world.** Play allows children the opportunity to act out events they see going on around them. They mimic many themes from the adult world, which allows them to gain an opportunity to try out what they see and gain a better understanding of the world around them. Such play efforts can give adults insight into a child's ideas, interests and fears.
- **Children learn other viewpoints and how to interact in social settings and relationships.** As children play together, they learn to see each other's points of view and often begin to become more empathic and caring. They learn to be responsive to others socially.

- **Children learn a lot about their own emotions and the feelings of others during play.** Research shows that because children experience a lot of excitement and emotional ups and downs during play, they become more aware of their own and others' emotions. Adults who play with children can show them positive examples of managing emotions and being sensitive to others' feelings.
- **Children encounter other people and cultures and develop an awareness beyond themselves.** Children often come to understand customs and rules of other cultures than their own through play with others. Cultural awareness allows them to become more appreciative of others and their experiences.
- **Children develop abilities for compromise and conflict resolution.** Through playing with others, children learn how to compromise with someone else (for example, "you can be the sister if I can be the mommy") and resolve conflicts. Children do not always agree when playing together. Through compromise and sometimes with adult assistance, children can learn to resolve conflicts with others successfully when they arise.
- **Children learn to use toys as tools for learning.** Toys provide children with the tools of play. Children who play often use toys not only to entertain themselves but to learn about how things work and how to engage others.

## Recommended Resources

### ■ Books and Pamphlets

Anderson, Rita, and Neuman, Linda. (1995). *Partners in Play: Creative Homemade Toys for Toddlers*. New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company Inc.

*A book that provides valuable knowledge and ideas for ensuring children experience play as part of their learning and growth.*

Cohen, L.J. (2001). *Playful Parenting*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Johnson, James E., Christie, James F., and Yawkey, Thomas D. (1999). *Play and Early Childhood Development* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.

*This book brings together research on the importance of play and its function in child development.*

McCracken, Janet Brown. (2000). *Play Is Fundamental* (pamphlet).

Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

*This pamphlet highlights the fundamentals of play and how parents can enhance play in the lives of children. This NAEYC brochure can be ordered by contacting the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1509 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1426 or calling (800) 424-2460 or going online at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).*

Rogers, C.S., and Sawyers, J.K. (1998). *Play in the Lives of Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

*This book is a useful and positive overview of the importance of play in the lives of children. Copies can be ordered from the National Association for the Education of Young Children by calling the number above or through its online Web site (see above example).*

Sheridan, M.D., Harding, J., and Meldon-Smith, L. (2001). *Play in early childhood: From birth to six years* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

*Classic work on play in the lives of children and the importance of play for early education and development.*

Toy Industry Foundation. *Fun Play, Safe Play* (pamphlet). New York, N.Y.: Toy Industry Foundation.

*This pamphlet provides insights into toys as Atools of play,@ an age-linked guide for toys to use with children, and safety guidelines in toy use and purchase. This resource can be ordered from the Toy Industry Foundation, 1115 Broadway, Suite 400, New York, N.Y. 10010. The resource also can be printed from the foundation's Web site at [www.toyindustryfoundation.org](http://www.toyindustryfoundation.org).*

## References

Anderson, R., and Neuman, L. (1995). *Partners in Play: Creative Homemade Toys for Toddlers*. New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company Inc.

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Johnson, J.E., Christie, J.F., and Yawkey, T.D. (1999). *Play and Early Childhood Development* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.

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