

What Young Children Learn Through Play

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What do children learn from their play experiences? More than you might expect! Play opens the windows of learning in a child's life and acquaints him or her with movement, observation, relationships, emotions and much more. Play time is learning time for young children.

Play Time as Learning Time

Children love to play. They enjoy trucks, blocks, dolls, balls, dress-up clothes, puzzles and other toys. Play time provides children with opportunities for learning. In fact, play is really the most important way that children learn about the world around them. Play helps children to grow and develop in many ways.

At times, parents might worry that children are "just playing" and not learning things they need to learn. Structured guidance and teaching of young children is essential; however, parents and other caregivers need to remember that play IS learning for young children. What are some things that children learn in the process of play? This publication will help you to learn about and explore that question.

<i>When Children...</i>	<i>They Learn...</i>
Smile and coo at people	How to engage others in interaction
Shake a rattle	Their actions produce results; to distinguish sounds
Throw toys on the floor	Principles of gravity; cause and effect
Look at picture books	Pictures represent real objects; words label objects
Roll a ball	How to gain control of muscles; round stuff rolls
Cuddle a stuffed animal	To rely on their own ability to seek comfort; to nurture
Build with blocks	Concepts of size, weight, symmetry, number and balance; muscle control and coordination
Dress up and play house	Small muscle, self-help skills; to recreate their own world
Pretend to be firefighters	Social roles; to work with others; share materials and communicate with other children

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Play Time for Parents and Kids

If play is so important in the lives of young children, parents and care-givers need to write down “Play” on the daily schedule and make sure it happens every day – right? Not exactly. Although play time can be scheduled, parents need to remember that play often needs to be:

- Enjoyable
- Spontaneous
- Open-ended

Children learn things from play that they can learn through no other interaction. Remembering that play time should be just that – PLAY + TIME – is important for adults.



What is My Child Learning?

What are children learning through all of their play activities? Considering the skills and qualities that a child may develop through a variety of play activities is important. As you review this material, take a moment to read and discover the importance of what children learn through each of the play examples provided. Next, using the “Parent Response Box,” list actions or activities you might initiate as a parent to facilitate learning related to the play example.

Here are a few tips that parents can remember to make play time for their young children more rich and meaningful: _____

- **Provide sufficient time for play.** Children need time to explore an activity, make up a story or wrestle with a playmate. They become frustrated if play is interrupted often or is cut short. Chewing on and exploring a new toy takes time as an infant. Fashioning a pyramid out of blocks takes time. Inventing a game with neighborhood children takes time. Parents should allow children to play in sufficiently large blocks of time for imagination to develop and interactions to take place.
- **Arrange for variety in play experiences.** Different kinds of play lead to different kinds of learning experiences. Picture or story books help with concentration. Balls help develop coordination and motor skills. Dress-up clothes provide for creativity and social interaction. Often, giving children fewer toys of a wider variety is more important than dozens of complicated toys.
- **Explore play with children.** Children enjoy directing their own play much of the time but can benefit and gain ideas from a parent’s feedback or example.

For example, introduce a child to a new game such as kickball or help him or her fashion a pyramid out of building blocks. Children will enjoy your involvement and you can model play for them. Also, you can enjoy yourself!

- **Respond to a child’s invitation to play.** Play with adults can help children develop as they learn to sing, play catch, listen to stories, create art work or engage in other play activities. Say “yes” when a child asks you to play with him or her.
- **Ensure that toys are safe.** Safety should be a parent’s concern. Adults should screen children’s toys and ensure their safety by checking the toys often for breaks, cracks, sharp edges or other potential concerns.
- **Help children have positive play interactions with others.** Parents can help children learn to have positive play interactions with other children. Assist children to engage with each other and begin play experiences, provide guidance if needed and aid them in resolving concerns or disagreements if necessary.

Music and Dance

Listening to music and dancing can be wonderful play experiences for children. Most young children enjoy this activity immensely. These activities provide a wonderful opportunity to talk about feelings (for example, “Does this song sound happy or sad?”) or concepts such as opposites (for example, “Is the music fast or slow?”). A discussion about what you see or think when you hear a piece of music is a great way to expand storytelling skills and imagination. For children, listening to music and dancing:

- Connects the world of movement and sound with the inner world of feelings and observation
- Helps them learn patterns, rhythm and differences in sounds
- Expands a child’s imagination
- Aids physical fitness, balance, coordination and movement abilities
- Finger plays and other nursery rhymes help develop:
 - Language skills (verbal and listening skills)
 - Small motor skills; hand-eye coordination
 - Memory, rhyming
 - Self-esteem

Listening to Music and Dancing

Parent Response Box – Activity Ideas

• (Example: Play songs with different musical beats and have children move to each rhythm.)

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Arts and Crafts Activities

While you may not recognize the drawing or painting, the chances are very high that your child can tell you a whole story behind the colors and shapes and placement of certain lines. They mean something in your child’s world. Cutting and drawing develop the muscles in their hands and fingers that will later button their shirt and write their name. They learn cooperation while sharing materials. When working on a collage with shapes, children can sort and classify items into groups based on shape and color. Sorting and classifying objects are skills needed to learn to read or do math.

The amount of pride a child shows in artwork is a boost to a developing sense of self. An adult who shows interest in artwork is an even bigger boost for a child’s sense of esteem. Remember, with arts and crafts activities, *the process of making the art, not the product (or finished picture), is most important!* Ask your children to tell you about their arts and crafts activities. Ask not just about what it is, but about colors they have used, materials they chose or feelings they tried to express. Engaging in arts and crafts activities helps children learn and develop:

- Creativity
- Pre-reading and pre-math skills
- Social skills
- Emotional expression and exploration
- Strength in hands and fingers (fine motor skills)
- Self-esteem

Cutting and Gluing and Drawing Pictures

Parent Response Box – Activity Ideas

• (Example: Draw pictures of different family members with your child.)

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Outdoor Play

Outdoor play provides children with opportunities that develop their muscles while also introducing them to the world around them and interactions with others. Exercise and developing the habit of maintaining good physical health is extremely important. Using their muscles while running, jumping or throwing develops large motor skills. Kids learn creativity during outdoor play as they invent games of tag or hide-and-peek, and their outdoor adventures build social awareness and risk-taking skills. Outdoor play helps kids learn and develop:

- Balance and coordination (jumping, climbing, skipping, etc.)
- Strength in all muscle groups (large motor skills)
- Healthy lifestyle and activity habits
- Social interaction skills through taking turns, outdoor games, etc.
- Creativity
- Awareness of the world around them and nature (sun, trees, wind, etc.)
- Observation and use of their senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, moving, etc.)

Yelling and Running Around Outside

Parent Response Box – Activity Ideas

• *(Example: Go to a local park and play hide-and-peek)*

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Snack Time

Children have to learn to wait their turn and have to ask others to pass them items during snack time – they are learning manners. When setting the table for snacks, they count the number of people eating and set one place for each person – they are learning math. Serving themselves food, picking up food items and using silverware strengthens the muscles that later be will used in writing – they are gaining small-muscle coordination. Talking together while they are eating or serving snack items – they are learning conversation with others. Snack time helps children develop:

- Social skills and manners
- Small-motor skills
- One-to-one correspondence and counting (the ability to match one item to one item, such as one napkin to one person)
- Spatial organization
- Verbal skills – talking with others at a meal
- Understanding of volume (for example, cup is full or empty) and fractions (for example, half a cookie)
- Awareness of the importance of healthy food habits

Snack Time

Parent Response Box – Activity Ideas

• *(Example: Practice verbal manners such as “please” and “thank you” at snack time.)*

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Playing With Blocks

Blocks must balance and be stacked in a symmetrical way to remain standing. And, of course, children talk to one another the entire time they are building with blocks. Children really do learn a variety of life skills from building with blocks. When you get home from the grocery store and have to make all the boxes and cans fit in your pantry or the cartons and containers fit into your refrigerator, you are relying on all the skills you used while building with blocks. Playing with blocks can help children learn:

- Scientific principles and concepts (balance, gravity, cause and effect, etc.)
- Mathematical concepts (symmetry, shape, geometry)
- Small-muscle skills; hand-eye coordination
- Feelings of competence and self-esteem
- Life skills – concentration, abstract thought
- Social interaction with others
- Creativity and organization of materials

Stacking Up Blocks and Knocking Them Down

Parent Response Box – Activity Ideas

• (Example: Organize materials with a child to build a fort or building.)

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Dramatic Play

Often you will see adult themes in a child's play – taking care of babies, going to work, being a firefighter, driving or going to the grocery store. This is a child's way of trying to understand "going to work" or other activities that parents do on a daily basis. The story lines often are very complicated when children are playing games with dress-up clothes or other "real life" toys, especially with older preschoolers. They will assign everyone a role, describe the plot and explain who has what duties. Coming up with all the pieces for the play really takes a lot of thought. Through such pretend play and interaction, children learn:

- Practicing situations from the grown-up world in a setting that is safe and secure
- Understanding of the world around them and daily living activities
- Concentration and attention skills
- Sequential acts and story writing/telling
- Flexibility, cooperation and compromise
- Empathy and consideration for the feelings of others
- Abstract thinking

Playing with Dress-up Clothes

Parent Response Box – Activity Ideas

• (Example: Volunteer to observe a fashion show for children as they use dress-up clothes.)

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Conclusion

Research shows that children who are active in pretend play and other types of play are usually more joyful and cooperative, more willing to share and take turns, more creative in their activities and have larger vocabularies than children who are less involved in imaginative play or other play activities. Play provides the foundation for learning in a child's world and opens the door to a world of learning opportunities. You may have heard this: "Play is children's work. If they are successful with this first job, it will lead to further success later in life."

Support your children in their play. Understand the importance of play and how much your child is learning. Engage in play with your children and provide opportunities for them to interact with other adults and other children in play. Build towers, dance, sing, paint, run, laugh and watch your child's learning unfold.

The Little Turtle – A Finger Play

Finger plays, that use fingers and hands, are simple, rhythmic activities that children enjoy. Try the following with your child.



The Little Turtle

There was a little turtle *(make a fist like a turtle)*

That lived in a box. *(draw a square in the air)*

It swam through the puddles *(swimming motions)*

And climbed on the rocks. *(climbing motions)*

It snapped at a mosquito. *(snap your fingers)*

It snapped at a flea. *(snap your fingers)*

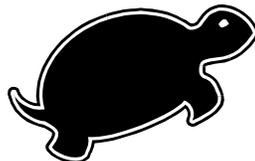
It snapped at a minnow. *(snap your fingers)*

And it snapped at me. *(snap towards yourself)*

It caught the mosquito. *(tickle your child)*

It caught the flea. *(tickle again)*

It caught the minnow. *(tickle again)*



But it didn't catch me.
(point at self, shake head no)

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.

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 tools 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, NY 10010. The resource also can be printed from the foundation's Web site at 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.
- Borden, M.E. (1997). *Smart Start: The Parents' Guide to Preschool Education*. New York: Facts on File Inc.
- Johnson, J.E., Christie, J.F., and Yawkey, T.D. (1999). *Play and Early Childhood Development* (2nd ed.). New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.
- Johnson, J.E., Christie, J.F., and Wardle, F. (2004). *Play, Development and Early Education*. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers.
- 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.
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