

The Importance of Play

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Think back to when you were growing up and there weren't computer games or as much concern about children not being safe playing outside. How did you spend time with your friends? Chances are you had more time to play and to imagine than your children have nowadays.

Undirected play allows children to express their creativity and develop their imagination, physical strength, and problem solving skills. When young children play with friends, social skills and emotional responsiveness are learned and practiced. If children had enough time and encouragement to play outdoors, chances are there would be fewer overweight children.

Play also affords the opportunity for parents and children to engage fully and enjoy each other. It's an important ingredient to positive discipline. If you spend time with your child, they are less likely to misbehave to get your attention. Unfortunately, in the fast paced world we live in, play is sometimes eliminated as families put other pressing things on their daily schedule.

Children need down time. Even though after-school activities directed by adults can be fun and educational, children blossom when they have time to discover what they want to do, and time to play. Some reminders about play:

- It helps children build healthy bodies.
- It's important to healthy brain development.
- It's a fun way to connect with others.
- It's the work of children.
- Children learn how to learn while playing.
- Learning to take turns and to play fair are important skills for life.
- Make believe can increase cooperation, empathy, and impulse control.
- Play helps children to work out things that bother them, and to cope with difficult situations and traumatic events.

Although academics are important for children to lead successful lives, social and emotional development are equally important. Some play ideas for young children:

- Build with blocks and knock them down.
- Expand their imagination with a dress-up box filled with scarves, hats, and clothes.
- Build forts with blankets and sheets draped over chairs or tables. Pillows from an old couch can turn into a cave or hiding place.
- Draw with markers or paint on an easel.
- Play with stuffed animals and dolls that sometimes turn into parents, teachers, or pretend friends.
- Climb, jump, or swing. Playing at a park is an all-time favorite with most kids.
- Take walks and lead the way at their own pace.
- Listen to music, dance, and sing.
- Act silly and laugh.

If we're lucky we can be reminded of the joy of play as we watch children at the park throwing a ball, or on the sidewalk jumping rope. Some books on play:

- *Power of Play* (David Elkind)
- *Toy Tips* (Marianne Szymanski)
- Report from the American Academy Of Pediatrics: www.aap.org/pressroom/play-public.htm
- Enjoy your kids! Enjoy yourself!