

# The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Development

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**Play is essential for a child's development and for learning life skills. While the information in this publication is specifically for parents, the information applies to other adults including grandparents, extended family members and child care providers that have opportunities to affect the play of children.**



## MontGuide

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### PLAY IS A CHILD'S WORK. PLAY IS IMPORTANT

for children's development and for children to bond. It offers a chance to connect with your child. You are your child's first teacher and much of that teaching happens through play. Play helps your child learn the rules of your family and what is expected of him or her. As children grow, play helps them learn how to act in society.

Parents need to make time to play with their children. You start to play when your child is an infant. When your baby starts to smile and you smile back, you are engaging in play. Play is directed by the child and the rewards come from within the child. Play is enjoyable and spontaneous. Play helps your child learn social and motor skills and cognitive thinking.

Children also learn by playing with others. You provide the setting for your child to play with others. As your children grow, you provide toys, materials, and sports equipment so that they can play with others. It is important that children learn that play is important throughout life.

Play is needed for healthy development for your child. Research shows that 75 percent of brain development occurs after birth. Play helps with that development by stimulating the brain through the formation of connections between nerve cells. This process helps with the development of fine and gross motor skills. Fine motor skills are actions such as being able to hold a crayon or pencil. Gross motor skills are actions such as jumping or running. Play also helps your child to develop language and socialization skills. Play allows children to learn to communicate emotions, to think, be creative and solve problems.

### Playing With Your Child

In today's world of balancing work and home schedules, parents find it hard to have quality time with their children. It is essential for parents to make the best use of time they have with their children. Your child needs time with you to relax and play.

Playing with children builds lasting bonds. Playing allows parents to appreciate the uniqueness of each child. Playing with children can also be a stress reducer for over-

worked parents. Laughing and relaxing are important to your own well-being.

Try to spend individual time with each of your children. When a parent or sibling plays a board game with a child, shares a bike ride, plays baseball, or reads a story, the child learns

*"When you asked me what I did in school today and I say, 'I just played.' Please don't misunderstand me. For you see, I am learning as I play. I am learning to enjoy and be successful in my work. Today I am a child and my work is play."*

Anita Wadley, 1974.

self-importance. Your child's self-esteem gets a boost. You are sending positive messages to your child when you spend quality playtime with him. From these early interactions, children develop a vision of the world and gain a sense of their place in it.

Family activities are important for the whole family. They help develop strong family bonds, which can last a lifetime. Families who play together are more cooperative, supportive and have better communication. Have movie nights and game nights, or go for walks together. A game night allows parents to teach children to take turns, how to win, how to lose and methods of sequencing events. Listening to music together by singing along, or playing rhythm instruments will help children to listen for and recognize patterns in music, which will assist with math skills in school. If you are a single parent or have only one child, invite family and friends over to play.

Today, children of all ages are exposed to technology such as computers and videos. Children who spend most of their time using technology often are not physically active or using their imagination. You can help your child by reducing screen time. Limit screen time to no more than two hours per day. Make sure your child gets a minimum of one hour of physical exercise every day.

You have important roles in play. You can encourage play by providing interesting materials that promote exploration and learning. Playing with your child helps him learn how to manipulate toys and other play materials by modeling your actions.

## Types of Play

As your child grows and develops, his or her play evolves. Certain types of play are associated with, but not restricted to, specific age groups.

**Unoccupied play:** In the early months of infancy, from birth to about three months, your child is busy in unoccupied play. Children seem to be making random movements with no clear purpose, but this is the initial form of playing.

**Solitary play:** From three to 18 months, babies will spend much of their time playing on their own. During solitary play, children are very busy with play and they may not seem to notice other children sitting or playing nearby. They are exploring their world by watching, grabbing and rattling objects. Solitary play begins in infancy and is common in toddlers. This is because of toddlers' limited social, cognitive, and physical skills. However, it is important for all age groups to have some time to play by themselves.

**Onlooker play.** Onlooker play happens most often during the toddler years. This is where the child watches other children play. Children are learning how to relate to others and learning language. Although children may ask questions of other children, there is no effort to join the play. This type of play usually starts during toddler years but can take place at any age.

**Parallel play:** From the age of 18 months to two years, children begin to play alongside other children without any interaction. This is called parallel play. Parallel play provides your toddler with opportunities for role-playing such as dressing up and pretending. It also helps children gain the understanding of the idea of property right such as "mine." They begin to show their need of being with other children their own age. Parallel play is usually found with toddlers, although it happens in any age group.

**Associative play:** When your children are around three to four years of age, they become more interested in other children than the toys. Your child has started to socialize with other children. This play is sometimes referred to as "loosely organized play." Associative play helps your preschooler learn the do's and don'ts of getting along with others. Associative play teaches the art of sharing, encourages language development, problem-solving skills and cooperation. In associative play, groups of children have similar goals. They do not set rules, although they all want to be playing with the same types of toys and may even trade toys. There is no formal organization.

**Social play:** Children around the age of three are beginning to socialize with other children. By interacting with other children in play settings, your child learns social rules such as give and take and cooperation. Children are able to share toys and ideas. They are beginning to learn to use moral reasoning to develop a sense of values. To be prepared to function in the adult world, children need to experience a variety of social situations.

**Motor - Physical Play:** When children run, jump, and play games such as hide and seek and tag they engage in physical play. Physical play offers a chance for children to exercise and develop muscle strength. Physically playing with your child teaches social skills while enjoying good exercise. Your child will learn to take turns and accept winning or losing.

**Constructive Play:** In this type of play, children create things. Constructive play starts in infancy and becomes more complex as your child grows. This type of play starts with your baby putting things in his/her mouth to see how they feel and taste. As a toddler, children begin building with blocks, playing in sand, and drawing. Constructive play allows children to explore objects and discover patterns to find what works and what does not work. Children gain pride when accomplishing a task during constructive play. Children who gain confidence manipulating objects become good at creating ideas and working with numbers and concepts.

**Expressive Play.** Some types of play help children learn to express feelings. Here parents can use many different materials. Materials may include paints, crayons, colored pencils and markers for drawing pictures or writing. It can also include such items as clay, water, and sponges to experience different textures. Beanbags, pounding benches, and rhythm instruments are other sources of toys for expressive play. You can take an active role in expressive play by using the materials alongside your child.

**Fantasy Play:** Children learn to try new roles and situations, experiment with languages and emotions with fantasy play. Children learn to think and create beyond their world. They assume adult roles and learn to think in abstract methods. Children stretch their imaginations and use new words and numbers to express concepts, dreams and history.

**Cooperative play:** Cooperative play begins in the late preschool period. The play is organized by group goals. There is at least one leader, and children are definitely in or out of the group. When children move from a self-centered world to an understanding of the importance of social contracts and rules, they begin to play games with rules. Part of this development occurs when they learn games such as Follow the Leader, Simon Says, and team sports. Games with rules teach children the concept that life has rules that everyone must follow.

## Benefits of Play

There are many benefits to play. Children gain knowledge through their play. They learn to think, remember, and solve problems. Play gives children the opportunity to test their beliefs about the world.

Children increase their problem-solving abilities through games and puzzles. Children involved in make-believe play can stimulate several types of learning. Children can strengthen their language skills by modeling other children and adults. Playing house helps children create stories about their roles, such as “I am the Mom.” They also imitate their own family experiences. This helps children learn about the different roles of family members.

Children gain an understanding of size, shape, and texture through play. It helps them learn relationships as they try to put a square object in a round opening or a large object in a small space. Books, games, and toys that show pictures and matching words add to a child's vocabulary. It also helps a child's understanding of the world.

Play allows children to be creative while developing their own imaginations. It is important to healthy brain development. Play is the first opportunity for your child to discover the world in which he lives. Play offers a child the ability to master skills that will help develop self-confidence and the ability to recover quickly from setbacks. For example, a child may feel pride in stacking blocks and disappointment when the last block makes the stack fall. Play allows children to express their views, experiences and at times, frustrations.

Play with other children helps a child learn how to be part of a group. Play allows a child to learn the skills of negotiation, problem solving, sharing, and working within groups. Children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace and discover their own interests during play.

Unstructured play may lead to more physical movement and healthier children.

Play is important when your child enters school. Play can assist children in adjusting to a school setting. It enhances children's learning readiness and their cognitive development by allowing them to move from subject and area without of the fear of failure. Playtime in school such as recess time, allows learning and practicing of basic social skills. Children develop a sense of self, learn to interact with other children, how to make friends, and the importance of role-playing. Exploratory play in school allows children time to discover and manipulate their surroundings.

## Conclusion

Play is an essential and critical part of all children's development. Play starts in the child's infancy and ideally, continues throughout his or her life. Play is how children learn to socialize, to think, to solve problems, to mature and most importantly, to have fun. Play connects children with their imagination, their environment, their parents and family and the world.

Parental involvement in a child's world of play is not only beneficial for the child but is extremely beneficial to the parent. Playing with children establishes and strengthens bonds that will last forever. Parent-child play opens doors for the sharing of values, increases communication, allows for teachable moments and assists in problem solving. Playtime provides opportunities for the parent and child to confront and resolve individual differences, as well as family related concerns and issues. Finally, it allows the parent to view the world through the eyes of a child once again.

Let's Play and Have Fun!



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## How Do You Play With Your Child(ren)?

After reading this guide, list three types of play that you observe when your child is playing.

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What type of play do you enjoy with your child?

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List three ways that you would like to change when playing with your child.

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As you look to the future, what are you looking forward to playing with your child?

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Keep a list of your child's growth. Write down your child's likes and dislikes of toys and games. Ask yourself, am I playing with my child in his or her world? Note your reactions and enjoyment with playing with your child. Be ready to change play as your child continues to grow.