



INFORMATION FOR PAERENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

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Child's play...

The importance of play in the early years and beyond

Children are naturally curious – they spend a lot of their time trying to learn about and understand the world. It is not by coincidence that children also spend a lot of their time each day engaging in play. In fact, playing and learning are inextricably linked – they cannot be separated from each other. Play, as it turns out, is one of the central mediums of healthy psychological, social and emotional development for children.

Play may be defined as a voluntary, pleasurable activity which usually has some imaginary or make-believe quality and which, more often than not, occurs in the context of social interaction. Of course, this may look like anything from day-dreaming, to building Lego, to wrestling with friends or siblings, to playing computer games. And it is not only children that play – play is also an important part of life for adults, but may look a little different to the play of our children (or maybe not)! Quite interestingly, play is seen right across the mammalian species, with the amount and complexity of play

increasing as we observe animals further and further up the evolutionary tree, and with younger mammals generally playing much more than older mammals. Primates play the most, but humans top the leader board. When we observe the play of animals, it appears to be an imitation or practice of the skills they need in adult life – lions will play at stalking and pouncing, while zebras will play at running and dodging: that is, they are modelling, learning and practicing very important skills that will lead to their eventual survival as a species. Children essentially follow suit, however due to human complexity, and the fact that we have a very long period of immaturity, play takes many forms and serves many functions – all of which will increase our chances of being successful humans. For example, by playing peak-a-boo (and when combined with other similar repetitive experiences) a young baby may start to form the beginnings of an understanding of turn taking within reciprocal communication and relationship with others. They also feel good, so their sense of security and

by Joseph Degeling, Psychologist

trust in others develops. By banging kitchen utensils on a cooking pot they are learning that their actions have consequences (the cause-effect relationship) – that they can be an active agent in their environment. By jumping in an old cardboard box and “driving to Grandma’s house” they are starting to practice much more advance cognitive skills – they are demonstrating that their thoughts can be liberated from concrete objects (things they can see in front of them) to mental representations of objects (things that they can’t see in front of them): i.e. the cardboard box IS a car. As adults we do this with ease, but for children this represents a huge step forward in their cognitive processes. Children also engage in role specific play – little girls may want to play dress-ups, while little boys may want to play with their toy tools. They are mentally representing themselves as little adults.

Through play children create a world they can master – they may act out the conquering of their fears and anxieties (by defeating the evil

monster). They also develop skills in emotional resilience by playing with different emotions (by pretending their little brother is a crying baby and acting out a the soothing of them), or by exposing themselves to emotions that they need to problem solve – such as being frustrated that their sister isn't playing monopoly right, but then teaching the sister how to play properly. Play usually occurs in a social context, and even if a child is playing with an imaginary friend, they will practice skills such as communication, relating to others, turn taking, negotiating and problem solving, and all the while continuing to develop their fine and gross motor skills. By acting things out sequentially children develop the skills in mentally organising information, as well as developing their vocabulary, skills in literacy and sentence structuring.

So playing IS essentially about learning and development. But it doesn't stop there. Even as adults play serves some very important functions. It can provide a valuable form of stress relief, can stimulate the mind and boost creativity and can help us to improve relationships and communication. There is even evidence that it certain games and

activities can improve brain function. In the words of George Bernard Shaw "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing".

How can we create a playful home?

1. Resist the urge to pack away your child's toys all the time – rather sit down with them and let them lead you in their play. At the end of each day you can pack up together, which can also be a game if your clever enough;
2. Create regular times to play together as a family – whether it's playing tip in the backyard, or playing scrabble inside games. These activities will help to consolidate your relationship, and heal any wounds;
3. If you have a pet, encourage your child to play with it. You can play with your family pet as well!
4. Get some joke books for your kids, or try to get in the habit

of reading some out to the regularly;

5. Introduce magic to your children, and encourage them to learn their own tricks;
6. Arrange play dates with your child's friends;
7. Introduce some playfulness into your relationship with your partner;
8. Do some art and craft together, but let your children lead this activity – this will enable them to be creative;
9. Set limits on screen time – while it is ok for kids to play with technology, it needs to be kept in moderation with other forms of play as well;
10. Get your child into some weekend sport.

RECOMMENDED READING

- *The whole brain child*, (2011), By Daniel Siegel and Tina Bryson;
- *What's going on in there: How the brain and mind develop in the first 5 years of life*, (2000), by Lise Elliot.



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