



Why play is important

Being interested and supportive of a child's play helps them to feel connected, valued and accepted. Having fun together during play time enables children to experience pleasure and joy.

Play helps children develop social skills

Play is important for learning the social skills (including language and communication) that develop over time and will be the foundation for future relationships.

Through play, children learn about:

- the give and take of relationships with friends (negotiating)
- how their behaviour can affect others and to develop empathy
- how to lead and follow
- repairing relationships.

Play helps children develop emotional skills

Through play, children can express their feelings, even before they have the words to say how they feel. Play also fosters imagination and becomes the basis for creativity in art or music or other ways of self-expression. These ways of personal expression can help people cope with feelings all their lives.

Play can also help children learn impulse control. They learn to think about what they want to do, to plan and to be patient. If they're building a castle and get frustrated and knock it down, they have lost their castle. In these ways, children gradually learn they need to control their impulses to achieve what they want.

Play is a way that children can work through and resolve problems

For example, a child whose family has separated may feel very anxious about what's going to happen to them. These feelings and possibilities can be explored through play. The child can practise having two homes set up with two houses and different dolls. There's no need for you to take part, but being near while the child plays shows support and acceptance.

Play helps children develop physical skills

Children like games that test their physical abilities (motor skills) – running, climbing, jumping and exploring. These games bring children happiness and build their confidence.

How do children play?

As children grow, the way they play will change. Examples of play for children of different ages is below:

Babies (birth to around 18 months)

With babies you might try:

- music, songs, gentle tapping on your baby's tummy while you sing, bells or containers filled with different objects – these activities can help develop hearing and movement
- objects of different sizes, colours and shapes to encourage a child to reach and grasp
- sturdy furniture, balls, toys or boxes to get a child crawling, standing and walking
- play with movement (for example, holding a baby while singing, swaying or gently dancing)
- play with words, such as in simple rhymes, animal noises, books, blowing raspberries and playing peek-a-boo.

Toddlers (around 18 months to three years)

A toddler might enjoy:

- big and light things like cardboard boxes, buckets or blow-up balls to encourage them to run, build, push or drag
- chalk, rope, music or containers can encourage jumping, kicking, stomping, stepping and running
- hills, tunnels or nooks that encourage physical activities like crawling and exploring
- experimenting with different sounds and rhythms (try singing, dancing and clapping along to music with your child).

Preschool children (around three to five years)

Ideas to get your preschooler's mind and body going:

- Old milk containers, wooden spoons, empty pot plant containers, sticks, scrunched-up paper, plastic buckets, saucepans and old clothes are great for imaginative, unstructured play.
- Simple jigsaw puzzles and matching games like animal dominoes help improve your child's memory and concentration.

- Playdough and clay help your child develop fine motor skills.
- Favourite music or pots and pans are great for a dance concert or to make up music.
- Balls and frisbees can encourage kicking, throwing or rolling. When encouraging your child to kick or throw, try to get them to use one side of their body, then the other.

School-age children

School-age children can have fun with the following objects and activities:

- Furniture, linen, washing baskets, tents and boxes are great for building.
- Home-made obstacle courses can get your child moving in different ways, directions and speeds.
- Rhymes or games like "I spy with my little eye, something that begins with..." are great for word play and help develop literacy skills.
- Simple cooking or food preparation like measuring, stirring and serving food is great for developing numeracy and everyday skills.
- Your child's own imagination – with imagination, your child can turn themselves into a favourite superhero or story character.
- If your child is interested, you could think about getting them into some sports or team activities for school-age children. Other possibilities include after-school or holiday art and craft activities.

References

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