



Play: Key to Children's Learning and Development

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Most adults understand that play is natural for children -- we like to see them busy and happy. Now researchers are finding out more about why play is essential to children's healthy development.

For young children to learn and develop well, their bodies and minds need to be active – they learn by doing. When they play, they're doing things they choose and enjoy, trying out their developing ideas about the world and learning about the effects of their own actions. They're learning how the world works. They're developing skills – mental, physical, and social. And they're building positive attitudes about life and learning.



PLAY IN THE FIRST MONTHS

- **You are your baby's favorite toy:** From interacting with you, your baby learns the back-and-forth of "conversations;" the joy of smiling, laughing, tickling; the fun of peek-a-boo and dancing.
- **Babies play to learn how to use their bodies:** kicking their feet, waving their hands, experimenting with sounds they can make.
- **Babies play to figure out how they can have an effect:** if they squeeze the stuffed rabbit, it squeaks. If they smile at you, you smile back.
- **Babies play to explore** how different things look, sound, and feel.

BUILDING POSITIVE ATTITUDES

When children follow their own interests, doing what they enjoy:

- They are motivated to learn.
- They develop the habit of taking initiative and being active.
- They develop confidence that they can do things, learn, and figure things out.
- They are having a good time! That helps them develop a positive attitude about life.

PLAY WITH BLOCKS, PUZZLES, SAND, AND WATER

When children play with a variety of objects, they are experimenting with different materials, learning about problem-solving, and developing skills in using their hands. By playing with:

- **Blocks** -- children learn math ideas – shapes, counting, sorting, comparing sizes. They also practice problem-solving – how to build a tower that doesn't fall down.
- **Puzzles** -- children learn about shapes, how things fit together – and more problem-solving.
- **Sand and water** -- children learn measuring and pouring skills and do experiments – What sinks? What floats?

PHYSICAL PLAY

By running, skipping, jumping, climbing, dancing, and playing with balls, children are:

- Building strong muscles.
 - Developing physical skills.
 - Becoming fit, with less risk of obesity.
 - Improving their ability to learn.
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OUTDOOR PLAY

Outdoor play gives children the chance to:

- Be physically active.
 - Enjoy messy activities with water, sand, mud, finger-paint.
 - Explore and appreciate nature, become familiar with plants and animals.
 - Calm down – Free play in natural environments reduces anxiety and helps prevent hyperactivity and attention deficit disorder.
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PRETEND PLAY

Children love to pretend - with dolls and stuffed animals, dress-up clothes, toys that represent real things (trucks, vegetables) – or just their own imaginations. Through pretend play, children can:

- Develop creativity and imagination.
- Use one thing to represent another – a chair can be the cockpit of an airplane, a block can be a telephone. That helps them get the idea of reading and math – letters on a page represent a word, numbers represent a quantity.
- Practice real-life activities they see grownups do – going to the store, driving, taking care of babies, cooking.
- Work on their feelings – by acting out situations like being separated from or reunited with a parent, having a conflict, or doing something wrong and being scolded.

PLAY WITH OTHER CHILDREN

When they play with others, children develop and practice social and emotional skills. They learn:

- The give-and-take of social interaction
 - Cooperation skills: taking turns, working out rules for games, resolving conflicts (with adults' coaching).
 - Language skills.
 - Understanding and accepting differences.
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PLAY WITH ART MATERIALS

When children use pens, crayons, paints, paper, and play-dough or clay, they are:

- Expressing their ideas, feelings, and ways of looking at things.
- Learning skills in using the small muscles in their hands.
- Learning the satisfaction of creating.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Provide appropriate toys. The best toys are simple things that children can use in a variety of ways. They don't have to be expensive – ordinary household items like boxes, cups, spoons, pans, yarn, and old clothes are great toys.
- Make sure your child has lots of time and safe spaces to play.
- Limit screen time: TV, computer, etc.
- Show an interest in what they're doing: Talk with them about their play, let them tell you about it. Make suggestions about things they could do. Go along with pretend play: You're driving a car? Where are you going?
- Respond to requests for help: Do things they can't do (reach that doll on the top shelf), provide support or suggestions to help them do things they *can* do.
- Coach children in cooperating: Show them ways to play together, help resolve conflicts.