

NEWS

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Play

Introduction

Did you know that in every culture, all over the world, children play? The United Nations even considers play to be the right of every child.^[1] The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a report about how important play is and lists some of the benefits of play:^[2]

- Play supports healthy brain development
- Play is one way infants and toddlers engage in and interact with their environment
- Play allows children to safely explore their fears and practice adult roles
- Play is a way that children build relationships with their peers and caregivers

Play is a pretty important part of life. We have a biological drive to play, very much like our biological need to sleep.^[3] Satisfying the need to play can be very fulfilling. Play can bring deep joy for both children and adults.

In this News You Can Use, we will explore these topics about play:

- What is play?
- Why is play so important?



What is Play?



When you think of play, what comes to mind? For adults, it might be organized sports or a hobby. For older children, it can be a world of make believe. For toddlers and infants, it can be delighted rolling back and forth on the floor, banging objects together, pouring water, or just running around in circles.

Play is different for everyone. For example, to some, a room full of infants and toddlers is a really playful place, whereas for others, it can be pretty scary!

Play, put very simply, is an activity that is fun and engaging for the player. Play is freely chosen by the player, although play opportunities may be provided by others.

Play and Exploration

Exploration is where play begins. When infants and toddlers explore new objects they will often try to discover what each object is and what it does.^[4] For example, young infants might explore a rattle by mouthing, shaking, banging, pulling, and throwing it. Toddlers have more experience with exploring new objects. Toddlers, given an empty but closed container, might try to open, shake, turn over, look at the object, or even ask a caregiver for help.

Generally, exploration happens before play. Exploration is how we come to know an object. Once we have some understanding, then we can play with the object. Once the infant understands that shaking the rattle makes a noise, he can shake for the pure delight of shaking! The toddler who has discovered how to open and close the container can move on to playing with it by putting smaller toys inside the container and closing it up.

Often while children play, they discover something new about the object they are playing with. Maybe while shaking the rattle, the baby accidentally hits a mobile hanging over her head. Perhaps the toddler just discovered that while some toys fit into the container there are many that do not. When toddlers play, it brings them to a deeper understanding of the objects and to a place where there is more to learn.



What is Play? (cont.)

Theories About Learning Through Play

Another very important aspect of play, especially for infants and toddlers, is that play is a way they learn about and make sense of their world. Through play children can:

- Manipulate and understand the physical properties of objects
- Use and hear new language
- Build their relationships with caregivers and peers
- Use their bodies in new ways

The idea of learning through play can make more sense by understanding some of the theories about how people learn. Theories are ideas about how things work, and there are many theories about learning. The following are theories put forth by two famous people in the world of child development. In fact, you've probably heard of them before. Don't forget your own expertise, ideas, and experience. You probably have some of your own ideas about learning through play from spending time with infants and toddlers.

• *Jean Piaget* (1896–1980) studied how people learn. He was very interested in how children use play to learn about their world. Piaget believed that children learn through actively engaging in their environment. He believed that through play, children are practicing new skills and ideas until they really understand them, or as he put it, “constructing knowledge”^[5]. Piaget believed that play is the most important way children learn.

• *Lev Vygotsky* (1896–1934) also believed that children learn through play. While Piaget focused mainly on how children manipulate objects, Vygotsky felt that the adults who supported play were just as important. Vygotsky thought that while young children could learn some things by themselves, they would learn much more if helped by an adult. The difference between what a child can do alone and what a child can do with help is called the “**zone of proximal development**” When adults help children through this zone of what they can almost do, but not quite, it is called “**scaffolding**.”^[6] For example, think of a baby who can almost roll over, but gets stuck because his arm is in the way. An adult can scaffold, or help with their rolling over, by tucking in his arm.





What is Play? (cont.)

Your Own Cultural Lens for Looking at Play

Play is a part of every young child's life. How we play is different depending on our home life and culture.^[7] Some cultures provide lots of free time for play; whereas in other cultures, children spend less time playing. In some cultures, children's play is more cooperative; in others it is more competitive. Some families believe that play objects should be educational or store bought; other families might prefer or only be able to afford homemade toys. Just as children learn to speak the language they hear around them, the people and objects in their lives will provide structure for their play. Play is one way children learn and practice the values that are important to their families, how to interact with one another, and how to use the objects and language of their communities.

Take a moment to think about some of the messages you heard about play from your family growing up. How was play valued in your family? Did your parents, grandparents, siblings, or other family members spend time playing with you? Did you have lots of "educational" toys or store-bought items? Did you have many hours of unsupervised play or were you mostly involved in activities?



Why Is Play so Important?

Play benefits every aspect of child development. The act of play comes so naturally it seems to be little more than a simple, joyful experience. Many child development experts believe that play is how infants and toddlers learn about their world. Play provides children with opportunities to learn about and master relationships, language, math, science, problem solving, and their bodies. Let's look more deeply at all the ways play contributes to development.

Building Relationships Through Play

One of the most important things that young children learn through play is how to form and maintain relationships with others.



Why Is Play so Important? (cont.)

Play Builds Caregiver Relationships

Three-month-old Cayden lies in the lap of his in-home family caregiver, Julisa. Cayden stares at her and then coos. Julisa watches Cayden and repeats the sound he makes. Cayden smiles and wiggles as Julisa smiles back. Both Cayden and Julisa clearly enjoy their play together.

Even very young babies enjoy play. They make eye contact and sounds to their parents and caregivers. When the adult responds back to them, they might wiggle or coo. These back and forth interactions are the first steps toward forming a relationship, and are the “play” of very young infants.

Play is an important part of the relationship between babies and caregivers.^[8] Babies who have nurturing relationships in their lives have better play skills.^[9] These close relationships support infant’s and toddler’s play.

Play Builds Peer Relationships

Twelve-month-old Isaiah is standing at the door clapping his hands. He shouts “Hi” down the hallway. His caregiver, Elisa, comes to see who he is talking to. She realizes that fifteen-month-old Heidi is arriving with her mom. While Elisa greets them both, Heidi and Isaiah smile at each other and say, “Hi.” Isaiah toddles off to get a ball and turns to see if Heidi is following him. She is! He gets the ball and says to her, “Ball,” and hands it to her. Heidi takes the ball, and they begin to play by passing it back and forth.

Isaiah and Heidi might seem pretty young to be playing together. When babies have many opportunities to play together they begin to form early friendships. Have you ever noticed how even very young infants are interested in other babies? Maybe you’ve seen babies roll toward each other until they are close enough to touch. You may have noticed that some babies even seem to form friendships with each other. They might seek each other out every day, or you might notice they are pleased to spend time together. Each play episode adds a little bit more to the friendship, building up over time until children play easily together.



Why is Play so Important? (cont.)

Play Builds Social Skills

Thirteen-month-old Alliah takes her baby doll and brings it over to the chair where she and her friends eat. Alliah puts the baby in the chair and asks her caregiver for a spoon and bowl by pointing to the objects she wants. Alliah takes the spoon and scoops into the bowl and pretends to feed her baby. As she brings the spoon to the doll's mouth she says, "Mmmm."

Tasia and Jo Jo are two-year-olds who love the toy vacuum cleaner in their child care provider's home. If one of them has it, the other wants it. Jo Jo found it first today, and Tasia came over and tried to grab it from him. Their caregiver walked over to the struggling toddlers and said, "Tasia you really want the vacuum cleaner, but Jo Jo is playing with it right now. Can you ask him if you can have a turn when he is done?" Tasia and Jo Jo have been through this before. Tasia turns to Jo Jo and says, "Turn?" Jo Jo nods yes and continues to play for a moment, then brings the vacuum over to Tasia with a grin and says, "Here you go!"

Think about something you are really good at. Maybe it's changing a diaper on a wiggling baby. This is a skill that probably took some practice before you were such an expert. Play is a way children "practice" doing what they see the adults around them do. Older toddlers are likely to be found in the dramatic play area imitating the roles and routines they see around them every day.

It is not unusual to see a child feeding a baby doll and practicing other types of caregiving. Even younger babies might be seen chatting on a toy phone or gently holding a doll. Caregivers and parents can support this sort of play by providing props like dolls, dishes, and phones.

While it is always preferable to have multiples of a popular toy, sometimes it doesn't work out. Sometimes a toy that sat on the shelf for months without being noticed is suddenly a hot item! When two children both want the same toy, consider it one of the many opportunities presented through play for learning new social skills such as waiting and being patient. It is not developmentally appropriate to expect infants and toddlers to share a single toy. However, as they get older, they can understand the concept of taking turns. When toddlers are taking turns it can help for an adult to point out how patient they are while they wait for their toy. In the mean time, adults might offer the toddlers another play opportunity while waiting for their turn.



Why Is Play so Important? (cont.)

A sensitive adult can help children play successfully with each other. A child who has a difficult time playing with peers might play better with a little bit of help. The adult can also help toddlers' continue to play together. Much like the Tasia and Jo Jo's story earlier, it is not unusual for infants or toddlers to want a toy someone already has. When someone else is playing with a toy, it's like a commercial that just makes that toy look like so much fun!

Sometimes kids can work these differences out without help. It can be very interesting to watch the negotiation! However, if it looks like children might start hurting each other, then an adult will need to step in and encourage children to find ways to solve the conflict. Very young children may need suggestions from an adult to come up with possible solutions to work out their negotiations. A caregiver may suggest children can trade toys, do something else until their friend is done with the toy, or ask the child for the toy when she is done.

Learning About the World Through Play

Play is an important way that infants and toddlers interact with the people and objects around them. Through these interactions they learn about their world.

Understanding Concepts Through Mastery Play

At drop-off, nine-month-old Hannah cries as her mother hands her over to her caregiver, Jenna. Hannah has spent the past six months with Jenna and knows her well. Jenna explains to Hannah's mother that at nine months, Hannah is just starting to understand that her mother is still "out there somewhere," even when she cannot see her. This makes Hannah sad that she can't be with her mother all of the time. After Hannah is calm, Jenna plays peek-a-boo with her. Jenna chooses this game because it helps Hannah begin to understand that while a person may "disappear," he or she will come back. Hannah delights in the disappearance and reappearance of her beloved teacher.

Mastery play is when play is used to practice (or master) skills and ideas.^[10] An example of that is in the previous vignette. At about eight to ten months, babies may begin to show signs of **separation anxiety**. A baby who may have been very happy going to child care might suddenly have a hard time saying good-bye to her family. This is because the baby has begun to master the concept of **object permanence**—a person or object continues to exist even when it can no longer be seen. Not surprisingly, babies at this age seem to enjoy the game of peek-a-boo, which gives them a chance to practice and test out this new idea. Playing also gives children a sense of control, which can be comforting. In the previous vignette, Hannah cannot stop her mother from leaving, but she can hide herself under a blanket and reappear whenever she likes.



Learning About the World Through Play (cont.)

Another important concept babies develop through play is **cause and effect**, or learning that an action can cause something to happen. Some of the first cause-and-effect experiences are when babies cry and someone comes to comfort them. Babies are learning that crying brings adults to care for their needs. Another way babies learn about cause and effect is by playing with objects; for example, if you push a ball it will roll away from you. If you shake a maraca, it makes a sound. Play is a way that infants and toddlers learn about complicated ideas through simple and repeated experiences.

Play and Problem Solving

Three-month-old Diego lies on his back and mouths a rattle. He loses his grip on the rattle and it falls on his chest. Now he must find the rattle in order to keep playing with it.

Thirteen-month-old Samora understands a lot about blocks. She's spent a great deal of time knocking down towers built by her mom and home visitor, but now she is trying to build one of her own. She has two stacked and is placing a third block on the pile. Before she even lets the block go, the tower falls down!

Two-year-old Micah is running outside with his friends to play. Both he and Jayla run to the same bike. The two each try to climb onto the bike at the same time.

These children are all at the threshold of learning. What an exciting place for them to be! Will Diego find his rattle? Will Samora build her block tower? Who will get the bike, Jayla or Micah? These exciting episodes of discovery are happening every day in your group and during socializations. Children are using the skills they have in play, and their curiosity and interest push them to a point where they are going to have to learn something new in order to continue their play.

It might seem very difficult to watch Diego struggle with his rattle. He might seem frustrated and confused about what to do next. Observe him for a moment; let the frustration lead him toward a solution. The moment where his hand brushes the rattle on his chest is a thrilling moment of discovery for him! Of course, if a baby gets stuck or might get hurt, an adult should keep them safe. When you give babies a chance to solve the problems they create through play, it helps them learn new skills.^[11]





Learning About the World Through Play (cont.)

Play and Language

During a home visit three-month-old Dejah is making gurgles and coos to her mother. Her mother, Donna, waits for a quiet moment and then copies the sounds Dejah makes. The two have a playful conversation back and forth while their home visitor smiles nearby.

Mayanna sits on the floor with the babies. Ten-month-old Nita crawls into her lap. Nita grabs Mayanna's hands and begins to clap them. Mayanna says, "You want to play patty cake!" as they clap and sing together. Mayanna ends the chant with the phrase, "Put it in the oven for Nita and me!"

Twenty-eight-month-old Christian's favorite part of coming to socializations is the dramatic play area. He goes over and puts on his favorite hat and grabs a briefcase. He walks back over to his mom and says, "I go." His mother, Christina, says, "You are going somewhere. Where are you going?" Christian says, "Work." Christina responds, "You are going to work. What will you do there?" Their conversation continues with Christian giving small answers to her questions and his mother listening and responding to him.

As children grow and learn, their ability to understand and use language in play is growing as well. Even at the earliest stages of language development babies enjoy playing with sounds and hearing others make playful sounds too. Infants and toddlers love to hear songs especially when their names are used.

Play activities that involve adults are opportunities to use language with infants and toddlers. When playing with young babies, try repeating the sounds they are making. Babies can then make a sound with their voice and hear the same sound in your voice. They are likely to enjoy this game for many turns, and why not? This is an early form of conversation.

When infants' and toddlers' lives are full of songs and playful language they are likely to learn more words and have a better understanding of how to use them. It is important that adults who join in pretend play with children ask meaningful questions the child can answer in lots of different ways. Notice how Christian's mother turned his one-word answers into sentences and then asked him where he was going. She was asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions don't have a specific answer and the child can say whatever she likes and be "right." Some examples of open-ended questions are as follows: "Where is your car going?" or "What do you think happens next?" Open-ended questions encourage children to think and give them the opportunity to express their own ideas.



Learning About Our Bodies Through Play

As babies grow toddlers they are gaining so many skills that help them move their bodies around. Play is a fun way to learn about what your body can do and to be motivated to try new things.

Play and Movement

During one of their first few home visits Kayla talks to her home visitor, Diane, about her eight-month-old son Nate. She is concerned because Nate does not sit up well or crawl at all. Diane has noticed this as well and has been hoping for an opportunity to talk to Kayla about it. Diane notices that Kayla keeps Nate in his carseat for socializations. When Diane has gone on home visits Nate is often in a swing or an exersaucer. Diane begins gently by suggesting to Kayla that she give Nate more play time on the floor, at least half an hour a day to start. She shares that he might need more practice with using the muscles he will need in order to sit up or crawl.

In the first three years of life, infants and toddlers go from having little control over their bodies to becoming running, jumping, climbing, pushing, pulling, digging, active little people. That is a huge accomplishment! Babies are very motivated to learn how to use their bodies, and do so through active, physical play.

The National Association for Sports and Physical Education (NASPE)^[12] recommends that infants and toddlers have at least thirty minutes a day of physically active play. NASPE points out that although infants and toddlers are ready to be active, they need the support of the adults in their lives. That means limiting the amount of time babies spend contained in carseats, swings, or bouncy chairs. Make sure that even very young infants have supervised tummy time and opportunities for free movement. Tummy time can be more appealing if it is playful and there is an adult on the floor nearby.

Rough and Tumble Play

Hattie's dad José is the star of the socialization! He began by picking up Hattie and lifting her into the air saying, "You're flying!" Soon other children were begging for a turn to "fly" too. Jose turned some of the older children upside down much to their giggling delight. Many of the children at the socialization really enjoyed and even seemed to crave this sort of exciting play.

Toddlers Kenny and Molly are outside playing a game of chase that ends in catch and wrestle. Their squeals of laughter can be heard throughout the playground! Their caregiver Lisa is keeping a close eye on what they are doing, but she is not stopping their play.



Learning About Our Bodies Through Play (cont.)

The type of play called **rough and tumble play** involves giggling, chasing, wrestling, running, and flying. Teachers or home visitors might have different reactions to this sort of play. Caregivers might wonder if they can keep all of the children safe when there is such active play or wrestling going on. Rough and tumble play does need to be supervised to make sure children are enjoying it. As long as everyone is still smiling and having fun, there is little need for an adult to step in.

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Another benefit of rough and tumble play is that it can appeal to children who aren't as good at joining groups in play. Energetic play can be easier to join than a group already involved in the dramatic play area or building in the block area. Adults can help children keep this play in safe areas such as on a mat or outside, and make sure that everyone who is playing is having fun.

Now that you know more about play, it is time to use what you have learned! As you observe infants and toddlers at play, think what they are learning about the people in their lives and the world around them. How might you build on and expand their learning and exploration? You can share with parents and colleagues all that you have learned about how play supports the healthy development of infants and toddlers. Most important, find some time to play yourself. Playing helps all of us feel better, learn new things, and stay curious about the world around us.





Words You Can Use

Cause and effect: Understanding an action can cause something to happen. When a baby pushes a ball and it rolls away, he is learning that his action caused the ball to roll.

Mastery play: Play that is an opportunity to practice skills and ideas. When toddlers pour water into containers they are practicing, or learning to master, their pouring skills.

Object permanence: Knowing that an object, or a person, exists even when he or she is out of sight. Understanding object permanence begins around 8–10 months and may be accompanied by separation anxiety.

Open-ended materials: Toys that can be used in many different ways, toys that encourage imagination such as blocks, pieces of fabric, water, and sand.

Rough and tumble play: Play that involves contact between children sometimes in the form of chasing and wrestling.

Scaffolding: When adults support a child in learning a new skill. When a baby is learning to walk, adults often help them (scaffolding) by holding her hand before she is able to walk by herself.

Separation anxiety: When a baby has a difficult time leaving, or separating from, his family or caregiver. These fears can begin around 8 months and intensify between 10 and 18 months.

Symbol: A symbol is a word or an object that stands for something that is real such as when a toddler uses a block as a phone.

Zone of proximal development: The difference between what a child can do alone and what a child can do with adult help. For example, a child who cannot walk yet will first be able to walk with the help of an adult.



EndNotes

- [1] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2006. *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva, Switzerland (2005): 15. Retrieved April 9, 2009 from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.
- [2] Kenneth R. Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds," *Pediatrics* 119 no. 1 (2007): 183. Retrieved April 9, 2009 from <http://www.aap.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf>
- [3] Stuart Brown, M.D. and Christopher Vaughan, *Play: How it shapes the brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York, New York: The Penguin Group, 2009): 42-4.
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- [7] Hughes, *Children, Play, and Development*, 35.
- [8] Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000): 169.
- [9] Alicia F. Lieberman, *The Emotional Life of the Toddler* (New York: The Free Press, 1993): 14.
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- [11] Magda Gerber and Allison Johnson, *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to Encourage Your Child's Natural Abilities – from the Very Start*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998): 92-94.
- [12] National Association for Sports and Physical Education, "Active Start: A Statement of Physical Activity Guidelines for Children Birth to Five Years," (American Alliance for Health Physical Education Recreation and Dance, 2002) Retrieved April 21 from <http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/standards/nationalGuidelines/ActiveStart.cfm>.



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