

# Did You Know?

Your Child Needs to **P.L.A.Y!**



"If it hasn't been in the HAND  
...it can't be in the BRAIN."

(Bev Bos, Early Childhood Educator)

Many adults think of play as a "time filler." Parents are running themselves and their kids ragged signing them up for special activities and buying specific educational toys, thinking that these things will make their kids smarter. But allowing your kids free time to play may be the BEST thing you'll ever do for them!

When children play, they are actually doing important learning. Play to children is as important as food and rest.

But something has happened to play in the last fifty years. It's all changed. When we talk about play today, the first thing that often comes to mind is toys! Now we think of play as doing some *thing*. For many children, structured activities take the place of free play. Even more disturbing to childhood educators is the amount of time the average child spends in front of a television or computer screen. Screen time has replaced imaginative play.

For most of human history, children played in large or small packs, more or less unsupervised, engaging in free-wheeling imaginative play, writes Howard Chudacoff, play historian. Children improvised their own play and made up their own rules. But during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, play changed radically, he says. "Instead of spending their time in autonomous make-believe, children were supplied with ever more specific toys for play and predetermined scripts. Instead of being a pirate with a tree branch, they played Star Wars with a light saber." Then there came an increasing concern about children's safety, so parents looked for safer play environments like karate classes, gymnastics, art classes, and summer camps. Add to this, middle class parents' increasing worry about achievement. As a result, play is now linked to achievement. Lessons and leagues and electronic software are the ways children now spend their time in "play." Coerced by the marketing hype and by pressure from other parents, many parents believe they must offer anything that will "enrich their child's mind."

## CHANGE IN PLAY, CHANGE IN KIDS

**Kids Lack Self-Regulation** - A growing number of psychologists believe that these changes in what children do have also changed kids' cognitive and emotional development. One consequence, reports Alix Spigel on NPR, is that many kids today are lacking the ability to "self-regulate." As it turns out, all that time playing make-believe actually helped children develop a critical cognitive skill called "executive function"—which helps them regulate their emotions and behavior and control their impulses.

**Kids Aren't As Independent** - It's a sad fact that when researchers performed a test which was done in the 1940's with kids today, it showed that today's five year-olds are acting at the level of the three year-olds of yesterday. This is especially disturbing because executive function is a better predictor of success in school than IQ! Children who are able to manage their feelings and pay attention are better learners. Because children's play is so structured today (i.e.: focused on lessons and leagues), they don't get a chance to practice "policing themselves." Researchers also found that the children who are the most effective at complex make-believe play also happen to be the ones who clean up independently and have a greater willingness to take on responsibility and even help others!

### PLAY

#### ...A Waste of Time?

It seems that in the rush to give children every advantage—to protect them, to stimulate them, to enrich them—our culture has unwittingly compromised one of the activities that helped children most.

All that waste of time was not such a waste after all!

-Alix Spigel

**Play Is Thought to Be Unnecessary** - Because of the emphasis on academic learning and testing in the schools at an earlier and earlier age, drilling kids on their “fundamentals” has started earlier. Play is viewed as an unnecessary waste of time. Free play is shortened in order to use the time for teaching “cognitive skills.” How ironic that the thing that was thought to be a “waste of time” is really not such a waste after all!

## OLD -FASHIONED PLAY BUILDS SERIOUS SKILLS

**Play Builds the Brain** - Imagination is more than fantasy and fun. It stimulates brain development. When children are born, they have billions of brain cells just waiting to be used. These cells have the potential to perform all their future thoughts and behaviors. In order for this to happen, these cells must form connections and work together in groups. But here’s the catch: these connections *only* happen for a child through EXPERIENCE. This means that *everything* a child smells, hears and sees has the potential to make a new connection in his or her brain.

Today,  
Screen Time Is  
Replacing  
Imaginative  
Play!

Dr. Damon Korb, Developmental Pediatrician, says “the brain is working overtime making cellular connections when children play.” He emphasizes that play is critical for the networking of developing brain cells that will lead to advanced problem-solving, organized thinking, and language skills. Pretend play, he stresses, allows a child to generate experiences on his own throughout the day. Imaginative play means more brain growth!

**Play Stretches Thinking Skills** - Whenever you encourage your child’s imagination, you are also stretching your child’s thinking skills. Young children know best what they see, hear, smell or touch. That’s *concrete thinking*. But when they use their imagination for pretend play, they’re using *abstract thinking*, and that’s essential for school learning and for creative thinking and for problem-solving all through life.

- When children play, their interest is self-directed. They’re in charge.
- When children play, their interest is not literal. It is more open and creative and free.
- When children play, they are not concerned with just one particular goal. They are open to a variety of ways a goal can be achieved. They experiment with possibilities. They try out problem-solving. They become more flexible in their thinking and more creative in finding solutions.
- When children play, they free themselves from external rules. They make up their own systems. They learn to “police” themselves and self-regulate.
- When children play with objects, they discover what they can do with them.
- When children play, their attention is focused. They develop concentration. They are actively engaged and not easily distracted.
- When children play, they use their imagination and creativity.

### Play Allows Kids to Try on Feelings

It is this process, throughout life, that enables the growth of intelligence. Babies come with the “need to know.” Our job is to give them love, acceptance, and the raw material of appropriate stimulation at each level of development.

Much of pretend play seems to be a way for children to try on feelings. Playing out different roles is a way for children to begin to understand other people’s feelings too. Seeing things from another person’s perspective can be particularly hard for young children. Role-playing helps them feel what it’s like to be another person for a little while.

### Play Gives Power and Independence

Preschoolers are working hard to move from dependence to independence. But it is a back-and-forth struggle. This is one of the biggest challenges of the early years. Although children often argue about wanting to be in

Pretend play is a safe way for children to talk about what concerns them.

complete charge, they really don’t want to be in charge because it could be too scary for them. But they can *PLAY* about being in charge. Children can put their toys and pretend people in different situations and control their actions in ways they can’t control real people or events around them. They are using their imagination to practice new skills.

### Play Works Out the Stresses of Life

Pretending with puppets or playthings is often a safe way for children to talk about what concerns them. They will sometimes allow puppets to say or do things they would never say or do themselves. Behind this safe façade, they can test out their feelings and our reactions.

You will notice that children reverse roles quickly, too. One minute they play being “grown-up” and being totally in charge, and the next minute they are playing being the “baby” who needs mommy to feed her! It’s all part of the process. Sometimes the stresses of growing up are hard, and children like to have a break by pretending to be the baby who wants someone to take care of her.

## How Can Parents Help Stimulate Imaginative Play?

- **Leave Empty Places on Your Child's Calendar.** Empty hours teach kids how to create their own happiness—this is an important skill that everyone can benefit from. Unscheduled time encourages kids to create, imagine, and see new possibilities.
- **Fight off the "Do more/Be more" Thinking.** Be strong in the face of parent peer pressure to schedule your preschooler into lots of activities. Less is more. Preschoolers do not need multiple extra curricular activities. They do need time to develop their imagination.



- **Encourage Imagination and Pretend Play**

The best kind of play things are open-ended materials. Provide your child with props and keep it simple. The best toys are battery-free, such as kitchen sets, construction sets and play dough. Make art materials available. Cardboard boxes can become rocket ships! Provide costume materials and dress-up clothes. Since most of the play "action" takes place in your child's head, character costumes really aren't very helpful. Dolls, puppets, and little figures are useful for working through thoughts and feelings about the world.

- **Give Your Child Time to Organize His Own Play**

Children who can see relationships and organize input through play are better at organizing their thoughts and ideas. Jane Healy, author *Your Child's Growing Mind*, cautions that mothers who "hover" may impede their child's ability to form mental patterns of their own. Adults can get in a child's way! One study even showed that too frequent offering of food and drink to toddlers was negatively related to later school achievement.

- **Establish Television and Computer Guidelines for Your Family.** The less time, the better. "Screen time leads a child down a linear thinking path," says Dr. Korb, which in general "does not require creativity." Make a plan and stick to it. Your children will protest—but they will find new ways to let their imagination grow.

- **Read Books, Tell Stories, Play Games**

When reading stories, encourage your child to guess what will happen next. Take turns making up creative stories. Let your child lead you. Use funny voices and have your child be the main character. Play charades together.

- **Just "CHILL"!!**

Fight back against the stress-inducing anxiety of competition and academic rigor. Allow your family to have *down* time—in whatever way works for you. Make sure your kids see you "playing" too—whether it's relaxing with a book, doing a craft project, jogging in the park, building something, listening to music, or digging in the garden. Give everyone the "chill time" they need for creativity to flourish. Play nourishes everybody's spirit!

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**Sources:**

Imaginative Exploration Stimulates Development by Damon Korb, MD, *Developing Minds*, Summer 2007  
*History of Play* by Howard Chudacoff, 2007.  
Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills by Alix Spiegel, NPR Morning Edition, Feb. 2008  
Jane Healy, *Your Child's Growing Mind*, 1987  
Mr. Rodgers, *The Mister Rodgers Parenting Resource Book*, 2005.

Childhood is a process,  
not a product, and  
so is learning.  
Have faith—in childhood  
and yourself.  
Children's brains generally  
seek what they need, and  
nature has given you the  
instincts to help them.

—Jane Healy,  
*Your Child's Developing Brain*

Anne Kangas, L.C.S.W., *Family Services Director* 11/08

# What Children Learn From **Play**

### Block Play

- Builds muscular Coordination
- Teaches numbers, size, weight, balance, design
- Teaches how to control the action of the body
- Teaches how to do things in harmony with others



### Play Dough & Clay

- Develops coordination of hand muscles using small tools
- Gives relaxation
- Develops creativity

### Play with Toys & Objects

- Develops eye-hand muscle coordination
- Teaches math concepts: numbers, size, counting
- Teaches planning and organization by arranging objects into a design
- Reproduces real-life situations on a small scale
- Gives emotional satisfaction through fantasy
- Develops social skills with a partner
- Offers relaxation and absorption



### Dramatic Play Activities (Playhouse, etc.)

- Develops expression of thoughts and ideas
- Gives practice in using new words and phrases
- Offers real-life social play on a child-sized scale
- Gives stress release and emotional satisfaction through fantasy
- Offers the chance to take on adult roles
- Teaches social rules of behavior: waiting your turn, asking for what you need, working together to solve a problem, & handling emotions



### Art /Drawing/Painting

- Gives practice to hand and arm muscles needed for fine writing later
- Develops concentration
- Develops precision
- Gives the pride of accomplishment
- Teaches relaxation

### Reading & Story-Telling

- Develops listening skills
- Teaches new vocabulary
- Teaches that words in print tell a story
- Develops memory skills
- Develops active imagination



It Looks Like **Play** ..... But It's Really **Work**

**PAINTING and DRAWING** → Develops

Using bright colors to create satisfying personal symbols. Creating. Moving their arms, wrists, hands, and fingers.



→ **WRITING SKILLS**

Working with paints and crayons relaxing and gives the thrill of accomplishment.  
**RITING**

**SHARING and RELATING**

Talking about what has happened at home. Explaining a picture painted. Describing something constructed.



→ **Language**  
Speaking before a class

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**RHYTHMS and SINGING**

Hopping, skipping, and running in rhythm. Dancing like leaves or gliding like a plane. Singing of falling snow and growing things.



**LOOKING at BOOKS**  
**BOOKS**

Turning pages, looking at brightly colored pictures. Telling others about the story. Making up their own stories about the book. Showing others what is pleasing.



**INTEREST IN**

**LISTENING TO STORIES**

Children love hearing stories read and discussed. Children like to tell about their own experiences and share made-up stories.



**DRAMATIC PLAY**

Dressing up, "playing house," pretending to be a fireman, doctor, vet, etc. Making up stories and engaging in play pretend play.

**SHARING PLAYTHINGS**

Taking turns with jobs and activities. Letting others play and paint. Understanding how a group can have fun and get things done, too.



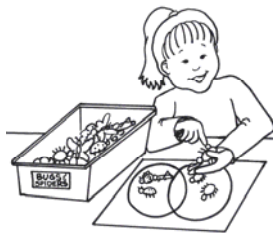
**CUTTING , PASTING, and CLAY**

Cutting pictures and insets on a line. Concentrating to squeeze glue in the right places. Creating pleasing designs. Rolling and pounding play dough to form objects.



**MATCHING and SORTING**

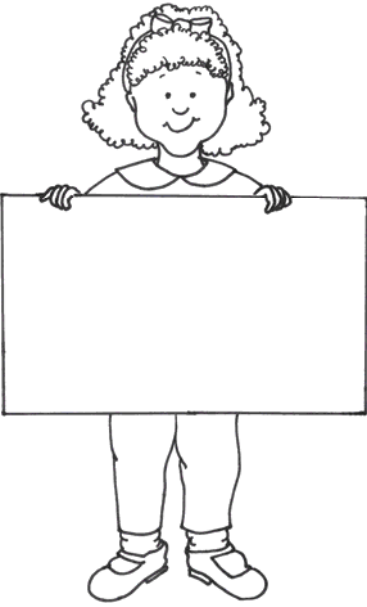
Matching similar and different objects. Classifying types.



**BLOCK PLAY**

Making towers, castles, houses, race

tracks.





# It Looks Like **Play** ..... But It's Really **Work**

**PAINTING and DRAWING** → ..... Develops..... →

Using bright colors to create satisfying personal symbols. Creating from a thought or idea. Moving arms, wrists, hands, and fingers.



something

**WRITING SKILLS**

Working with paints and crayons gives practice to hand and arm muscles, which develops the skills needed for writing. It also offers the pride of accomplishment and teaches relaxation.

**SHARING and RELATING**

Talking about what has happened at home. Explaining a picture painted. Describing something constructed.

→ **LANGUAGE SKILLS**

Speaking before a class  
**LANGUAGE SKILLS**

Engaging with others verbally helps children to **COORDINATION/CONFIDENCE** vocabulary, and formulate concepts and ideas.

**RHYTHMS and SINGING**

Hopping, skipping, and running in rhythm. Dancing like leaves or gliding like a plane. Singing of falling snow and growing things.

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