

# The Importance of Play

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## What is play and how is it important in a child's optimal development?

- Dr. Bruce Perry, who is both a child psychiatrist and a neurobiologist, says, "*Play, more than any other activity, fuels healthy development of children and the continued healthy development of adults. This is a bold statement. To judge this statement, we must consider what play is and how the human brain develops and changes.*"
- Play takes many forms, but the heart of all play is pleasure. We play using our bodies. We play using our minds. We use words to play. And we use props to play. While the exact nature of play evolves, becoming more complex as we grow, play at all ages brings pleasure. And with pleasure comes the powerful drive to repeat the pleasurable activity. And with repetition comes mastery. Mastery brings a sense of accomplishment and confidence. The more confident a child feels, the more likely she will explore, discover, master and learn.
- Brain development has three core concepts that can illustrate the central, crucial role of play in healthy development. The first concept is sequential development. The human brain is organized and develops in a hierarchical fashion. At each stage, it is play and the repetitive elements of play that help organize neural systems which will ultimately mediate more complex motor, social, emotional and cognitive skills.
- The second concept of brain development is that the brain is 'use dependent.' It's dependent upon the presence, pattern and frequency of experiences during development. The more patterned the activity, the more the brain regions dealing with whatever you are doing will organize and become healthy. Play has a crucial role in providing the repetitive experiences that can improve and express the potentials in all areas of the human brain.
- The third concept of brain development has to do with windows of opportunity. Much of this sequential and use dependent development of the brain takes place in early childhood. This means that of all the experiences throughout the life of an individual, the organizing experiences of early childhood have the most powerful and enduring effects on brain organization and functioning!

## So how do we play and how does that play grow a child's mind?

- One of the ways Perry defines play is 'as the spontaneous response of a child to the environment.' It can begin in the womb. Pushing back and forth.
- With a newborn, talking to her quietly and looking into her eyes might be the closest thing to play you want to do.
- At about six-weeks social affiliation play begins in earnest. You talk in a high pitched voice. You smile - he smiles. You stick your tongue out and a lot of babies will work to stick their tongues out. He says, 'aaaahhh' and you pause and say 'aaaahhh' back. You learn to coo in conversations. Literally billions of synapses are occurring in this sensory bath and growing your child's brain.
- By three months you have that quintessential baby. Smiling, flapping, wanting to play. You get more exuberant in those blowing-on-the-belly games. This is a great time to add peek-a-boo. Make up touching games. Fly that baby around like a baby bird -or an airplane. You want add laughter. When laughter is there, you know you've got play!

- As your baby begins to scoot and crawl curiosity based play takes over. Dr. Burton White says, "Bear in mind that a very strong exploratory drive is of central importance to humans. She, in fact, becomes *dedicated* to physical exploration as soon as she can move her body through space. *Nothing is more fundamental to solid educational development that pure, uncontaminated curiosity.*"
- So how do you nourish that curiosity that is so important? You give that baby as large an area to explore as you possible can. You make most of the house safe for her. You take him places. You let your baby know that being curious has great rewards. Your excitement is a nurturing return for her new discovery or trick.
- You let her touch and mouth and bang and throw. You let him run and learn to climb up on the little gym and when he makes it up to the top the first time, you cheer and your excitement encourages him to try more new things.
- With a toddler you work to see them as a midget scientist rather than someone who is "into everything."
- You see an older child's curiosity in his interests. You feed that interest.
- You set up for pretend play. Pretend play is about thinking. It is about playing with ideas, trying on roles. Sometimes it's about working through trauma.

**A word from the experts:**

- Dr. Michael Meyerhoff came to Houston to talk to parents and to teachers on the importance of choosing a play-based preschool over an academic one. He says you want your child to begin their school experience with a love of learning. You want joy. You want them to feel good about themselves and about learning. You want broad concepts and general skills. You're after understanding. You're after the imagination and creativity. You want them learning how to learn, not just being *trained* to sing their ABC's or count to 10!
- A mom complained to Dr. David Elkind that her child's preschool just let them play while her friend's child's school was teaching them to read. He replied "You know, they are having fun and enjoying themselves here and now, and this is every bit as important and valuable as preparing for the future." Elkind believes that in the busy, stressful world we live in, we are going to need recollections of happy memories to comfort us.
- I think Bruce Perry would say that fun and enjoyment *is* preparing them for the future. He says, "All learning - emotional, social, motor and intellectual - is accelerated and facilitated by repetition *fueled by the pleasure of play.*"
- Dr. Bruce Perry says, "In today's world we often underestimate the importance of play. We over-schedule our children with educational or structure activities that often inhibit spontaneous, curiosity drive exploration. We let them waste way too much time sitting passively in front of the TV set. In the end, if we want to help our children meet their potential, we must allow children to have free time, spontaneous play *with and with out us playing with them* and safe and enriched learning environments."

## **So how do you get to where you can really play with your child? Take off that shawl of responsibility and find your silly hat!**

### ***Get Silly:***

- That'll be my first suggestion - to learn to get silly. The deal is you're after fun. You're after laughter. Play "I'm going to kiss your elbow." Or "What's the monkey say?" Get loud and exaggerate! Dance with those toddlers. Shake your booties! Be a horsie!

### ***Get Physical:***

- Throw them around. Lots of tickles. Jump on a trampoline *with* them.

### ***Get Quiet:***

- This might be about books or about art. Sometimes its about just sitting and playing with whatever they are sitting and playing with.

### ***Get out of the Box!***

- Try to look at things like a child would. See that hall as a tall, narrow canyon just ready for races and ball play. Go to Home Depot just for fun. Or sit in the car and let your child play. Remember the fun a box of packing peanuts can offer.

### ***Get down and dirty!***

- One big, huge factor that keeps us from playing is that we don't like to get hot or dirty or messy. "I remember Carrie was never afraid to get wet or dirty so she acted like a kid. I remember my Mom sitting by the pool fixing us a picnic - but Carrie was always in the water with us. She dug in the dirt with us. She did the unexpected. She let us have a big bowl of flour to scoop and pour in the backyard. She gave us shaving cream and let us run around squirting each other. She had great toys: tbrides dresses with veils for all the girls, amink stole, a pinball machine." Remember mud is science!

### ***Get Adventurous!***

- It's more of an attitude than a destination. Go for walks - but be willing to get off the beaten paths. Walk behind the garage, through the weeds. Check out the water meters. Roll down hills - even little ones.
- ***Get Focused. Make some 'Grandmom Moments' for yourself!*** Set aside a dollup of time every day. Use that time just for play. Maybe go to a special room or a special place. Sometimes, you have to learn how to play. Let child teach you. Let child chose the play. Focus on child. Try to put all your other work aside and get into moment. Don't answer the phone. Think "spontaneous reaction to the environment." Think exploration and discovery. Just hang close by and look for a chance for interaction. Throw in a bit of the physical and add things to laugh about - and you've got a great moment for both of you!

## **Children need time to play with their parents and the opportunity to play on their own. How do you set up an environment that encourages play and helps a child learn?**

Young children learn by doing - not by having someone give them information - but by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling, by manipulating and exploring. Teachers of young children are guides and facilitators. You teach as you prepare the environment so that it provides stimulating, challenging materials and activities for children. Then, you closely observe to see what they understand and you might pose questions or add a challenge to push their thinking.

### ***An environment for that infant?***

- In the beginning your job is just to set up areas where you child can play without you.
- Use a Gyminnee or floorgym
- Provide a place on the floor with a few good toys like Sassy or Manhattan toys. You'll want a collection of toys and objects but you don't want to put them all out at once.
- Remember that househole objects like plastic bowls, Cheerios paper, or a collection of baby food lids in stainless steel bowl make great toys
- You often have to help a child learn to play on their own. They'll usually choose to play with a person. Put a 6-month-old on the floor with interesting things all around her and let her explore. Ignore fussing and gritching. You might sit close by and hand him things but don't go over and play. Allow her to learn how to get interested in things and mess around with them. You want a child who can play on own. Helps them be smarter and happier thru life. Use their interest and their abilities to help them entertain themselves.
- Exersaucer - sitting position helps a child reach and grasp and play
- Johnnie Jumper meets their interest in physical activity

### ***An environment for a crawler?***

- Your best bet is to give them access to as much of the house as possible. You want to add good things to play with like
- Balls, balls, balls!
- Sorters and/or toys where you put things in and take things out.
- Poppin' pals and/or an activity table
- Dolls/cars and trucks

- collections of animals - stuffed or plastic
- Little people scenes.
- Learn to rotate toys! If you keep at least half of your child's toys away and switch things out every other week, your child will probably play with them more.

### *What about the toddlers and twos?*

If they haven't learned to play on their own, set up a rich environment full of things that interest them -- and use a timer to help them get to where they can play on their own. Try 5 minute intervals and the stretch them to 10 or 15 or 30. That baby has learned to walk. Many of the things we have just mentioned. Some of the things that we'll talk about now. Little things to play with. Big things to ride on. Climbers. And then, if that isn't enough, you use a timer to help them get to playing on their own! You fill there world with things they can learn from. And sometimes you play with them and sometimes you help them learn to play on their own.

- Outside is a great place to begin because they can fid so many things to interest them. A good outside environment for toddlers and twos can look like this:
  - Places to run and climb and swing
  - Four wheel riding toys, Cozy Coups
  - All kinds of balls - for hooping, kicking, hitting, and throwing
  - *Water* - A dribbling hose. Water toys. Watering cans. Spray bottles. Buckets and paint brushes for painting with water. Sponges.
  - A lawn sprinkler, a small pool or just a large container of water.
  - Sand or gravel for pouring and scooping.
- Rich environments inside include that same water - just push a chair up to the sink and add measuring cups for scooping or doll babies for washing.
- Use the bathtub for an extra bath in the winter or when things are slow - let her wear a bathing suit.
- Balls and ball toys
- Have toys for pretend including little kitchens, dishes, toy food, birthday cake and hats. Add dolls and strollers and doll cribs and carriers and/or trains and trucks and construction sights.
- Include a push toy like a grocery cart - great for pretend or collections
- Construction toys like alphabet blocks, unit blocks, big cardboard blocks, bristle blocks, Duploes, and eventually pipes and Legos
- Toy animals - stuffed, plastic, big or small (Toobs)

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