

Play Away

By Dr. Connie Jo Smith

Do you like to play? Hopefully you enjoy playing because it is good for you. Through play you can relieve stress, build relationships with others, and enhance your intellectual skills. Play may relax you enough to help you solve a personal or work related problem and to make better decisions. Depending on the type of play, you may even get the bonus of some exercise and stronger muscles. There are many kinds of play and what is fun to one person may not be to another. The important thing is to experience guilt free playfulness frequently. Adults may deny themselves play because they have too much to do, but that is the very time when playing may be needed the most.



Play is Essential

Just like play is good for adults, it is good for children too. Play is actually more than good for children; it is essential to their healthy development and learning. Through play children relieve stress and explore their feelings. It is so easy to think that childhood is stress free but that is far from the truth. Children have many pressures and have yet to learn coping skills to help them handle the

pressure. Dramatic play activities where children initiate their own role play gives them a chance to express their emotions and experiment with their responses to life in a safe way. Playing with each other helps children learn to work out any differences they have and establish friendships. The communication between children playing enhances their language development. They are learning listening skills and verbal skills when talking to each other.

Physical play like running, jumping, and climbing can help use up excessive energy and relieve tension, while building strong and coordinated muscles. Physical play also contributes to a healthy weight and encourages life long exercise. (Don't you wish someone had helped you develop the habit of regular playful exercise when you were a young child?) Read any newspaper or listen to any talk show and you will hear about the concern in the United States about the rising obesity issue for our children.

Playing also builds the brain! As children learn to solve problems they encounter in play, they are increasing their cognitive skills. When a child tries to figure out how to keep the paint from running down the paper hung on an easel or how to incorporate the running paint into his picture, he is problem solving (and learning physics and creative arts). When a child is trying to build a tall structure with unit blocks and uses two square blocks to equal one rectangular block, she is problem solving (and learning mathematical concepts).

Play, The Child's Way

Child initiated play is when the children come up with the play situation themselves. This can be more meaningful (and provide more learning) because it comes from within the child, instead of being introduced by the adult. Even with child initiated play, adults have an important role by preparing an environment with safe and stimulating materials to spark play ideas by children. Adults can facilitate child initiated play by ensuring that the materials (toys and supplies) are within reach of children so they can get them without asking. Materials need to be safe for the age of children in the learning space and materials should be organized in ways that make sense for their use.

Adults can facilitate child initiated play by offering related materials to extend the child's play. For example, if a child is building a barn with blocks the adult could bring over some toy farm animals and ask if the farm needs some animals. If the answer is no, the adult should replace the animals and let the child know where they are if they need them later. Adults can also ask questions to help extend the child's play. If the child building the barn already has farm animals but no fence, the adult could ask curiously how they may keep the farm animals in the barn yard.



Remember that there are several possible answers the child could give. Just because a fence is what you had in mind, does not make it the only right answer. Maybe the animals are all well trained or the farm is a magic one where all animals stay close by. The important part is that the child is thinking, solving problems, and using language.

Playing with children in their initiated activity is also important, but sometimes it is hard for adults to let the children continue to lead the play. If you join in while a child is serving breakfast, ask nicely for some orange juice. Thank them after you drink it and move on. During your short exchange you have modeled manners and social behavior, and you may have also used a new vocabulary word like scrumptious to describe your orange juice. If they did not have orange juice to serve you, you have the opportunity to model adjusting to not getting what you ask for and making a second choice. Even if it is hard, do not take over their play and redirect it into your own.

Adults Lead the Way

There is a place for adult directed play too. Materials can be used to guide the play of children to support their learning of specific knowledge or skills. An example is if an adult sets up a science experiment for children to try out. A common one is "Sink or Float". Set out a pan of water with many objects in a container on one side of the pan. On the other side of the pan put a towel and an empty container. Children can place one object from the full container into the water to see if it sinks or floats, remove it, dry it on the towel and place it in the empty container. To make the exercise more

complicated there can be two empty containers, one with the word “Float” on it and one with the word “Sink” on it and children can place the objects according to their experiment. This game can be full of fun while children learn about a science concept.

While young children do not always enjoy games with rules, they generally do enjoy playing with adults. Simple board games like Candyland, Hungry Hippos, and Hi Ho Cherry-O can add to fun and learning. Memory, dominos, matching card games, and more offer a wealth of opportunities. Expect children to want to change the rules and to become bored after a short while. This is just part of playing with young children.



Adults may also lead some games that are physical in nature, such as parachute games. Parachutes can be purchased at army surplus stores or in educational supply stores. If you do not have a parachute, you can use a bed sheet. It is not quite as good but is still a fun alternative. Parachute games are a great way to build cooperation and include some physical activity. Begin by inviting children to stand around the parachute (or sheet) and each use both hands to

hold on. Ask all children to lift the parachute above their heads and then lower it to the ground. It will make a mushroom shape that children can watch rise and fall when they work together. Place a soft ball in the middle of the parachute and work together to roll the ball all the way around the parachute. You can all work together to bounce the ball in the air and then catch it. The possibilities are many. Just do an Internet search for parachute games and you will find directions for many easy ones to try.

Adults may also try to offer other physical games as an option for part of the outside time. Ones that do not have winners and losers will be more successful and are more likely to encourage the involvement of all children. The very children who are least coordinated are the ones who need to be active the most, so if they loose and have to sit and watch others play, it does not meet their need for developing more strength and coordination. We all have many chances to learn how to deal with defeat without losing be planned for by adults. Plus, play should be fun and losing is not much fun for anyone.

Play lets children (and adults) explore and learn new skills. Play is also a great way for children (and adults) to practice newly learned skills so they can be perfected in a safe way. And, play is just plain fun. Go play, now!

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