

Play: Your Child's Key to Learning

Play is essential to success in school and life. It is a central part of children's lives that allows for fun and relaxation while also supporting development and learning. Through play, children develop motor and cognitive (thinking) skills, explore emotional expression and relationships, and learn to negotiate, solve problems, and communicate. Fantasy or symbolic play often serves to help children cope with the demands and pressures of the adult world.

Key Strategies to Enhance the Value of Play

Take time to observe your child's play. This will give you the opportunity to learn about your child's motor, language, and cognitive development. Observe how they interact during play, perceive the world around them, and handle frustration and reaching resolution. All of these skills will be important later in life.

Mix it up. Children need a variety of play activities that develop gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. Play that involves large muscles (running, climbing, jumping) develops gross motor skills, helps prevent weight problems, and promotes physical wellness. Drawing, painting, and building with blocks can help develop fine motor skills, while organizing and sorting objects, doing puzzles, and playing guessing games are important to cognitive development. And, make-believe games support creativity, communication, social-emotional skills, and problem solving.

Make room to play. Provide space for physical activity, noise, and mess, as well as quiet play. Setting the range of space helps children understand boundaries and limits. Be sure to always include cleaning up at the end play time to begin teaching a sense of responsibility and task completion.

Go battery/electricity-free for a day. Many of today's toys are battery operated or electric and pre-programmed to operate a specific way. It may be necessary to set aside play days where these toys are *not* used. Instead, encourage your child to put on a play, play a board game, write a story, build a fort, draw, etc. These kinds of free-form activities offer children a way to play creatively and make decisions about not just *what* to play but *how* they play.

Play with your child. If you really want to know your kids, you have to play with them. Play between parents and their children is essential in developing children's feelings of attachment, security, and connectedness. Your child needs your time and focus in the context of their world.

Let your child lead. Allowing your child to choose activities that seem fun to *them* enhances development of autonomy and self-direction. Look for opportunities where your child can make safe and developmentally appropriate choices that encourage independence. Remember, if your child wants you to play, play as a *partner*, not the play leader. This is not a time for you to be in charge. Reflect your child's feelings and reinforce efforts to try something different. Above all, support your child.

Keep basic play items around the house. Keeping a few basic items around the house can make any free time a great play time. This can include simple art supplies (crayons, colored pencils, paper, glue, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, felt, safety scissors); empty boxes, egg cartons and old pie tins and pans; old blankets or sheets; dress up clothes; cards and board games; and outdoor equipment (rubber kick ball, soft ball or tennis balls, mitt, sidewalk chalk). Objects should always be age appropriate and inspected by parents.

You want your child to play and have fun. But remember, children should not be left unsupervised for any length of time. Even if children are old enough to play by themselves, check in periodically to see how they are doing. (This is a habit you will want to keep up even as they get older.)

Adapted from: "Play: Key to Learning," Deborah Johnson and Stephen P. Demanchick, Helping Children at Home and School II: Handouts for Families and Educators, NASP, 2004. The full handout is available online at www.nasponline.org/families.