

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT



According to Jaak Panksepp, a researcher at Washington State University, playing is an instinct we are all born with - and for good reason. Just like eating and sleeping, playing is a survival instinct. During play, we develop social skills, learn about give and take interactions and test limits. By engaging in negotiation during play, we build connections in the brain's executive control center, which helps us regulate our emotions, make plans and solve problems. This kind of brain development is important to success in school and in life.<sup>1</sup>

Since play is an important part of healthy child development, it is important to provide children with plenty of opportunities to participate in different types of play, especially free play. Free play is child-initiated play that doesn't involve direction from parents, teachers or coaches. This kind of unscheduled, unsupervised, playtime offers valuable educational opportunities. Psychologists at the University of Colorado found that children who engaged in more free play were better able to work productively toward self-directed goals than children who spent more time in structured, parent-guided activities.<sup>2</sup> Unstructured play may also lead to more physical movement and healthier children.

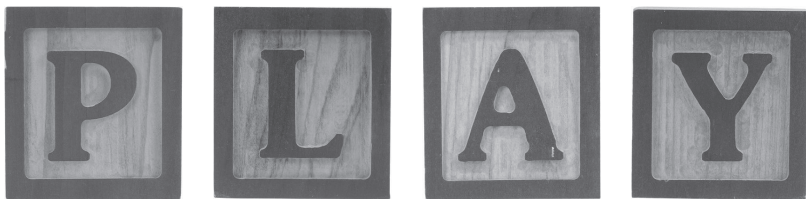
Parents and caregivers should provide infants and toddlers with a safe place to explore and a variety of age-appropriate items with which they can play. Children don't need a lot of fancy toys, but items of different sizes, shapes and textures help them gain an understanding of size, shape and texture. Children can learn relationships as they try to put a square object into a round opening or a large object into a small place.

Games and puzzles can help children develop their problem-solving skills and books that show pictures and matching words can build their vocabulary and also increase their understanding of the world.

Children stimulate several types of learning through creative, make-believe play. Modeling other children and adults can strengthen their language skills and playing house helps children explore the different roles of family members. Cooperative play begins in the late preschool period when children move from a self-centered world to an understanding of the importance of social contracts and rules. The play is organized by group goals. There is at least one leader and children are definitely in or out of the group. Games such as Follow the Leader, Simon Says and team sports teach children the concept that life has rules that everyone must follow.

All children need at least one hour of physical play every day. When children run, jump and play games such as hide and seek and tag, they get the exercise they need and encourage muscle development. Today, children of all ages are exposed to technology such as computers and videos. Children who spend most of their time using technology are less physically active. You can help your child by reducing screen time to no more than two hours per day.

Play connects children with their imagination, their environment, their parents and family, and the world. For more information on supporting healthy child development through play, visit: [www.zerotothree.org/child-development/play/tips-and-tools-play.html](http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/play/tips-and-tools-play.html).



1. <http://news.wfsu.org/post/scientists-say-childs-play-helps-build-better-brain>  
2. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/06/for-better-school-results-clear-the-schedule-and-let-kids-play/373144/>

## HERE'S HELP

For more information on how you can support your child's healthy development at every age, check out the Family Development Guide available at [www.ounce.org/CAP2014/Parenting\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.ounce.org/CAP2014/Parenting_Guide.pdf).