

Learning and Play - Maximize the Value of Your Child's Playtime

By Paul Fox

Why Play Is Important Play is one of the many ways that children learn. Children who have access to a wide range of well selected toys and an opportunity to experience varied playtime are more likely to be challenged and stimulated. Studies have found that they reach higher levels of intellectual development, socialization and emotional development regardless of their sex, race or social class.

Parents and carers should be looking to encourage play with toys that stimulate mental development and are appropriate for the child's abilities. Toys should also be responsive to the child's movements and provide feedback for the child (either physically, visually or auditory) when manipulated. Whether playing alone or with others, quietly or with enthusiasm, play is the way children explore their world, learn new sensations and create imaginary friends and places.

Learning New Skills When a child reaches for a toy they immediately begin to develop their early hand and eye coordination, strength, balance and agility. Toys such as activity centers, block letters, shape sorters and games will help your child develop many new skills. Toys and games that are used with playmates encourage sharing, cooperation and communication. Remember that very young children especially, find the idea of sharing difficult until they have understood the concept of ownership. Wooden blocks and construction toys will assist in developing spatial play, whilst jigsaws, dominoes, puzzles and other board games are great for logical play. Physical activities will vary depending on age but using balls and skittles and push and pull along toys are excellent for developing strength and coordination. Discussion, singing and story telling can accompany books and many other types of word and picture games. Parents and carers should encourage the use of children's dolls (male and female), action and character figures, costumes for dressing up and hand and finger puppets for imaginative play.

Research has shown that through play children learn how to plan, communicate and solve problems. Play encourages them to develop language and social skills and to use imagination and creativity to develop relationships and playact out situations.

Children who are encouraged and supported to play are happier, better adjusted, more cooperative and more popular with their peers than those who do not have the time set aside to play and explore the world. Children will have a tendency to play longer when a wide selection of toys is available. It is not always the most expensive or imaginative toys that provide the greatest stimulation and enjoyment. It is often better to have a selection of different toys than one very expensive one.

Play Pointers To enable children to get maximum benefit from their playtime they should feel safe, secure and comfortable in their surroundings, with supportive carers present and a wide assortment of toys to encourage varied playtime.

You should try to choose toys that are fun for your child to play with. To be fun they should match the child's maturity and challenge his or her skills. Try to have a selection of toys that offer a wide variety of features and activities (providing feedback for the child), bright primary colors and black and white contrasting coloring, different textures and a selection of sounds which will ensure continued stimulation and interest for the child.

From an early age children should be encouraged to be involved in the selection of their toys. Any good toy shop should allow you to try out the toys with your child and enable you to gauge your child's reaction to the product. Toy shops should also offer advice on suitable products for you to try based on experience and recommendations and advice on safety aspects as well.

Playtime should be all about fun for your child and for you so encourage playtime whenever you both feel it is appropriate. Do not force children to play or push them to play games that may be too difficult for them or if they are just not in the mood! Also remember that children also need to know how to play on their own, especially to develop imaginative play. Always allow them some playtime alone to create their own games and learn to enjoy their own company. Do not feel guilty about leaving your child to play alone (supervised of course) as you will see the benefit of this as your child grows up.

Most importantly enjoy playtime and have fun!

Disclaimer: This article is for informational purposes only. Please consult the appropriate professionals for more information.