



WHITE PAPER

DISCOVERING THE TRUTH ABOUT PLAY AND ITS ROLE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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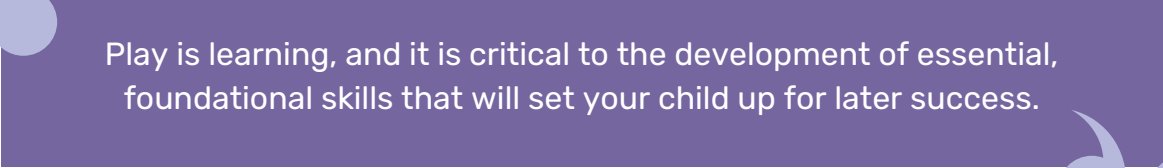


Discovering the Truth about Play and its Role in Child Development

In this white paper, we provide a comprehensive understanding of play and its role in social development. We define what developmentally appropriate play looks like at various ages and describe how it supports the development of more complex skills later in life. Lastly, we provide strategies to help children achieve critical developmental milestones related to play.

The Importance of Play

You might think of play as a break from learning, or perhaps as a break to allow you to get some things done around the house. Finally! The little one is occupied long enough to take a shower, use the bathroom, or wash the dishes! The list of things we must do as parents is endless, and play can afford us time, but play is so much more than just a break for parents and a break from learning for our little ones. It is the core of how learning occurs in the early years of a child's development.



Play is learning, and it is critical to the development of essential, foundational skills that will set your child up for later success.

Play is so important to learning that experts have devoted countless hours to trying to understand and define it through research, experiments, and the composition of entire books devoted to the topic. Its importance in early development cannot be underscored enough. For some children, however, play does not come as easily as for others.

What is Play?

Play looks very different depending on a child's age and developmental level. Not to mention, there are many ways to play, so how can one possibly know if a child is on the right track, or if they need support to learn how to play? The exact definition of play is debated by many experts, but at the most basic level, many psychologists agree that play is defined by the characteristics below.¹

Play is complex, yet beautifully simple at the same time. According to Professor, Peter Grey, in his work, "Free to Learn," play is defined as self-directed, focused on play itself rather than some particular outcome, structured by the player, imaginative and non-literal, and stemming from an active, alert, and non-stressed frame of mind.

Play is voluntary; it is an expression of freedom. Children help create and accept the rules of play, whatever those rules are determined to be, and participate in play from a source of intrinsic motivation. As a result, play is conducted in an alert, active, and non-stressed state of mind.

Play is meaningful and interactive, whether the interaction is centered around an object on its own or if another person is added to the mix. The first fosters exploration, curiosity, and imagination, and the latter adds a social component, allowing the child an opportunity to practice a host of important skills, such as communication, turn-taking, problem-solving, conflict resolution and many more.

Play is self-guided or guided by the group's ideas. While play does abide by rules, the rules themselves are created and agreed to by the players, as opposed to some outside force.

Play is imaginative and symbolic. It allows participants to use their creativity to recreate situations, jobs, and encounters they experience in daily life in a safe way. For example, children pretending to play school use their imagination to take on various roles and tasks related to the school environment as a means of understanding the experience through reenactment.

Play is enjoyable and motivated by the means rather than the ends. In addition to the voluntary component, playmates take joy in the moment-to-moment interactions rather than achieving some end goal.²

Myths about Play

Misconceptions often dominate our understanding of play, impacting our ability to support children accordingly. Let's begin by debunking the most common myths we hear, uncovering truths that serve as guiding principles as we think about the role play has in child development.

Myth 1: Babies are too young to play. This misconception could not be more untrue and results from a very narrow definition of play that does not take into account the fundamental ways that infants interact with their environment and caregivers. Babies play from the earliest age as a means of making sense of the world around them. A baby who mimics sounds, copies facial expressions, and moves their arms and legs around is engaging in the most basic forms of play. This infant is developing the basic skills of imitation and motor movements, both of which are later required to engage in more complex forms of communication, play, and learning.

Myth 2: Play is a break from learning. Professor Grey in "Free to Learn," further defines the role play has and continues to have in different societies and cultures across the world. No matter the environment, Professor Grey notes a continued return to the same conclusion; play serves as a child's instinct to educate themselves. Throughout his accounts of play across decades and societies, Professor Grey repeatedly describes how children reenact various situations they encounter in their lives, using play as a vehicle through which they understand the world around them.

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Myth 3: Toys are needed for play. Believe it or not, toys are not required in order to play. In fact, children often have more fun playing without toys. Toys can be limiting, especially if they can only be used effectively in specific ways. Sometimes, the lack of toys forces children to use their imagination, creating opportunities for the development of symbolic play in which common, everyday objects are substituted for their real-life counterparts. Think about how much more fun children often have with the cardboard box a toy arrived in than the actual toy itself!

Myth 4: Play slows academic growth. Many argue that children who spend more time playing as opposed to being exposed to various academic concepts are likely to fall behind peers who have a head start in the pre-academic department. Before we dive into debunking this myth, let's define the fundamental skills a child must develop to access pre-academic and academic learning, such as learning their ABCs, numbers, and letter sounds.⁴

- 1** Joint Attention – the ability to share a mutual focus on an object or thing that another person is also focused on
- 2** Attending – the ability to sustain attention on an object, topic, or task for at least five to ten minutes at a time
- 3** Imitation – the ability to copy actions and words modeled by others, allowing for critical practice required for learning
- 4** Following Directions – the ability to retain information and complete related tasks

All these skills are developed through play in the first few years of life. Without mastery of these skills, traditional learning becomes very difficult to access, ultimately culminating in the development of problem behaviors that further hinder social and academic development.

The Importance of Play in a Child's Social Development

Play is the way children learn about the world around them. Dr. Mildred Paarten, a prominent American Sociologist and Researcher, categorized play to occur in six distinct stages (unoccupied, solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative) throughout early childhood development.

Play in its infancy takes an **unoccupied** form in which babies take in the world around them through observations and the exploration of various body movements. From there, they develop increasingly sustained, focused, and complex play until they reach two and half years of age.

During this developmental period, children learn to play with toys and objects on their own, engaging in **solitary play**. Solitary play affords children the opportunity to learn how to occupy their time while learning foundational skills needed to later understand more complex concepts, such as waiting. Children also develop more advanced fine motor skills that prepare them for future, increasingly social stages of play. They begin to understand their preferences and explore toys in a variety of different ways.

Solitary play then morphs into **onlooker play** as children begin to show interest in the interactions of others. During onlooker play, children gain valuable information by observing their peers from a distance that they rely on in their future play schemes.

Next, children transition to semi-social forms of play, such as **parallel play**, which is defined as playing alongside peers but not directly interacting with them. In parallel play, children are preparing themselves for more advanced interactions while learning to play near others.

Children's skills continue to evolve as they advance into the most complex stages of social play, which include associative and cooperative play. In **associative play**, children begin to interact with one another more frequently while playing with the same toys but following their own agendas. In this stage, children may narrate what they are doing, comment on what a peer is doing, respond to peer initiations, and imitate other child's play-based actions.

Once children are comfortable with their play skills in the associative play phase, they will begin to show interest in sharing goals and working together, transitioning into the most complex form of play, **cooperative play**. In this stage, children develop their problem-solving skills, learning how to compromise, use teamwork, and navigate their emotions.⁵

The Stages of Play



Even though play is a heavily researched topic in academia and its critical role in child development is clear, myths and misconceptions continue to be pervasive. As such, play is rarely assigned the attention it deserves on an equal, if not more important level than academic learning.

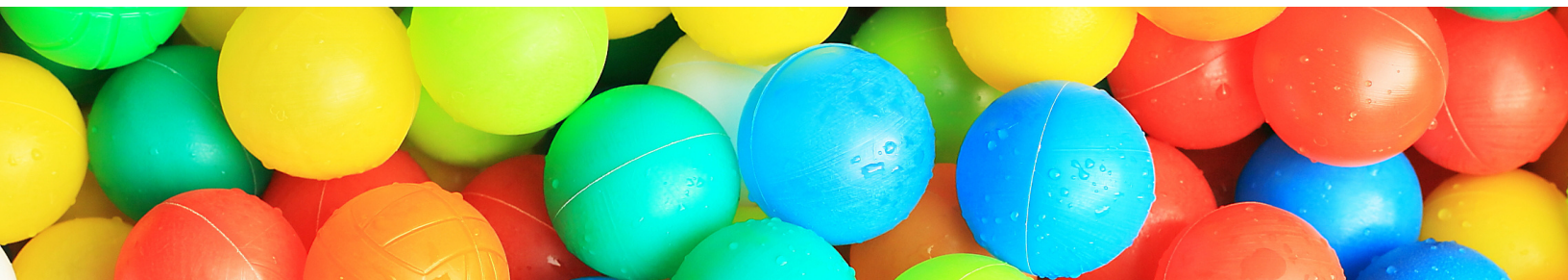
What is Age Appropriate Play?

Play evolves over time from simple explorative movements in infancy to more deliberate and planned exploration. Babies engage in the simplest forms of play developing their motor movements, coordination, communication, and responsiveness to sounds in their environment. Let's take a closer look at what play looks like throughout a child's earliest years.

Babies up to three months old explore gross motor movements by kicking their feet, moving their arms, and opening and closing their hands. They learn to move their heads, scan the environment with their eyes, and respond to sounds around them. Babies also practice using their vocal cords by making various sounds, demonstrating an emerging ability to smile at other people in their environment.

Babies who are four to six months old smile and giggle more spontaneously and deliberately, become increasingly observant, and produce more defined sounds, often referred to as "oohs" and "ahhs." At this stage, they develop increased strength, holding their heads up and turning in various directions in response to sounds. Their sense of curiosity explodes while their physical movements become more deliberate, taking the form of reaching and grabbing. With more control comes the ability to explore objects through mouthing. By six months of age, babies are playing through imitation, and developing basic turn-taking skills. They engage in a back-and-forth exchange of sounds with their caretakers, a playful scheme that closely resembles conversation. Babies at this stage also develop core strength, which enables them to roll, push themselves up on their arms, and explore their world in new ways that were previously impossible.

Babies who are seven to nine months old begin to express simple emotions, such as sadness, anger, happiness, and surprise, via facial expressions. They make simple requests in creative ways, for example lifting their arms in the presence of a caretaker to indicate that they want to be held. Communication begins to further develop, and first words emerge, such as "dada" and "mama." As the ability to share joint attention expands, babies enjoy games like peek-a-boo and tickling. Physical movements become more complex and coordinated, culminating in an infant's ability to crawl. Babies are enthralled by the creation of sounds made by banging items together. They practice moving objects from one hand to the other and learn to sit unsupported.



At this point, babies graduate to toddlerhood and from thirteen to fifteen months of age, they continue to develop more complex cognitive, communicative, movement, and problem-solving skills through play-based learning. Young toddlers begin to observe other children and imitate their simple actions, such as putting things in and taking things out of containers. They demonstrate a preference for certain toys and can communicate their likes and dislikes to others. They show affection, giving hugs and cuddles to caretakers and favorite toys. Language develops as simple words and word approximations for everyday objects take shape. Toddlers begin to play with toys, manipulating them in the ways they are intended to be used, for example by holding a toy telephone to the ear. They learn to follow simple directions, request items by pointing, successfully gain attention from others, and request help when needed.

From sixteen to eighteen months of age, toddlers become increasingly independent. They may walk further and further away from their caretakers, checking back to ensure they are in sight. Joint attention becomes more complex, and toddlers learn to get another person's attention, pointing to something they are interested in to share a moment. They assist with getting dressed, copying more complex behaviors, such as a parent doing chores. Fine and gross motor movements develop further, and toddlers begin to feed themselves using their hands, exploring the use of utensils. They also become expert climbers.

From nineteen months to two years of age, toddlers transition between solitary, onlooker, and parallel play. They tolerate playing near other children with similar toys. They begin to speak using short phrases and can respond to simple questions, like "Where's the bear?" by pointing to books and pictures. Toddlers notice when others are sad or upset, referencing their caretakers' reactions to understand how to respond to different situations. Fine motor skills, like pushing, twisting, grasping, and pinching develop. Hand-eye coordination improves, and the ability to multi-task starts to develop, as children can play with more than one toy at the same time.



From two to two and a half years of age, parallel play is perfected, and toddlers learn to gain attention of others by saying things like, "Look at me." They follow simple routines, label common objects in their environment when asked, and begin to use simple pronouns, such as "I" and "me." They engage in simple pretend play, such as feeding a stuffy or doll. Problem-solving skills develop, as evidenced by the child reaching for something by standing on a stool. Children begin to understand color concepts and can follow two-step directions. In addition, more independence is achieved with dressing and undressing routines.

From two and a half through three years of age, toddlers develop the ability to self-soothe, calming themselves down from a state of upset. They begin to engage in simple reciprocal conversation, showing inquisitiveness about their world through simple question-asking. They demonstrate an interest in peers, approaching other children when they are in sight. Play skills advance from parallel to associative play, in which children comment about their own play and that of others. They may engage in simple play exchanges and begin to share. They demonstrate an understanding of danger, recognizing a hot stove and paying attention to avoid it. Fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination continue to develop, and at this stage, toddlers may even be able to complete simple crafts, such as drawing or stringing beads.

From four to five years of age, language develops to include the use of complex sentences. Pretend play evolves to more complex levels, such as pretending to be a superhero. At this age, toddlers may request to play with other children when peers are not present. They oscillate between associative play and cooperative play, coordinating their play efforts with others and formulating a play plan, such as putting out a pretend fire on the farm. They take on the role of a helper, fill in what comes next in a story, recall simple events from their day to share with others, and coordinate their movements to catch, pour, button, and properly grasp a crayon or marker.



From five years on, language and play become more complex. Conversations can last more than three to four exchanges. Children follow along, taking turns in games with rules. They can sing simple songs, tell stories, and demonstrate readiness skills for learning academic concepts, such as numbers, letters, simple reading, etc.⁶

What are the Developmental Consequences of Not Enough Play?

Reduced access to and de-prioritization of play can lead to a state of “play deprivation,” a term coined by psychiatrist Stuart Brown, founder of the Institute of Play in Carmel Valley, California. Doctor Brown posits that play deprivation can lead to depression and increases in aggressive behaviors. He further argues that “sustained, moderate-to-severe play deprivation during the first ten years of life appears to be linked to poor early child development, later leading to depression, difficulty adapting to change, poorer self-control, and a greater tendency towards addiction as well as fragile and shallower interpersonal relationships.” Reduction in play also equates to deficits in the areas of problem-solving, emotional regulation, flexibility, and coping skills in response to stress.

Access to play is lessening for children across environments. In preschool and kindergarten, children are spending decreasing amounts of time in unstructured play environments and increasing amounts of time in structured academic learning settings that require little ones to sit and attend for periods of time far surpassing what is developmentally appropriate.

Play’s importance in learning cannot be underscored enough. It offers a pressure-free learning platform, improves creativity and problem-solving, and enables young children to solve logic problems. Simply put, play promotes health development, supports access to traditional learning, and ensures the development of meaningful relationships with others. Not enough play forces children into learning situations that surpass their developmental capabilities, which in turn can have a spiral effect. Children who are not ready for traditional learning environments in preschool and kindergarten develop social-emotional challenges and problem behaviors. These barriers then further impact their ability to access pre-academic learning and develop healthy relationships. The academic and social landscape evolves, becoming increasingly complex every year. Forcing children to access these settings before they are ready creates an ever-widening gap, later causing poor self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, all of which could be mitigated by simply allowing kids to be kids, relying on the power of play to promote early learning.⁷

Ways to Intervene if Developmental Play Milestones Aren't Being Met

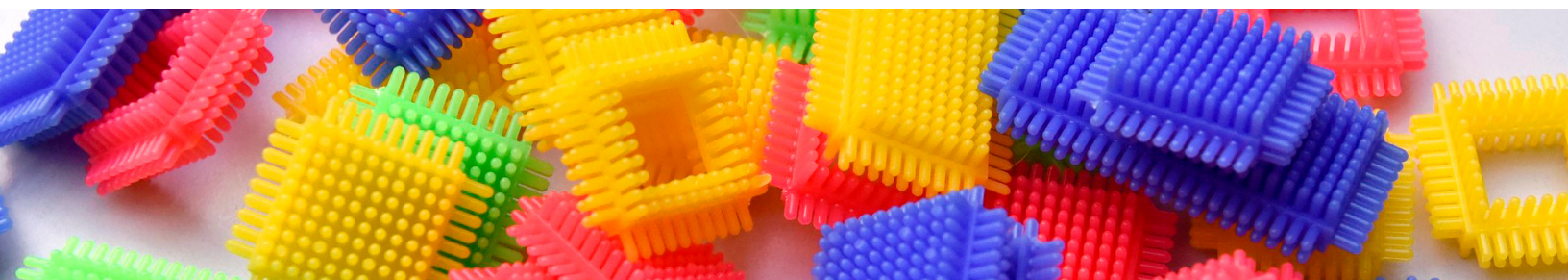
All of this begs the question...what can you do if your child is not meeting developmental milestones and does not have access to enough age-appropriate play opportunities? For starters, parents, empowered by an understanding of what milestones to expect at certain ages, can monitor their children's development accordingly. Keep in mind that milestones are merely meant to serve as a guide, as some children develop faster than others. However, an awareness of age-appropriate development allows caregivers to provide children with play practice that is developmentally meaningful, supporting them to achieve the next step in their learning journey.

Looking for additional resources? The Baby Navigator is a free online tool that helps families track their child's developmental progress from birth on. The CDC also provides a wealth of information and resources for families on their Learn the Milestones page, including a checklist, videos, free materials, and a milestone tracker app!

Lastly, before enrolling your child in a daycare or preschool, ask about the program's philosophy on play and understand how play is incorporated into daily activities and routines. Avoid programs that focus solely on teaching through tabletop learning for extended periods of time. Toddlers are meant to move around and explore. Know that a typical toddler's attention span at age four is anywhere from eight to twelve minutes, so sitting at a table for upwards of thirty minutes at a time is not developmentally appropriate, and all the same skills could be more effectively learned through play instead.

Conclusion

Play is the bedrock for developing socially, emotionally, and academically healthy children who grow into successful, well-adjusted adults. Without play, children encounter a whole host of barriers to developing meaningful relationships with others, demonstrate behavioral challenges, exhibit poor self-esteem, and are prone to developing anxiety, depression, and high-risk behaviors. Our hope is that empowered with this information, you become an advocate for play. Let's give our kids the foundation they need to succeed and rest assured they will take it from there! Happy playing.



End Notes

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