

Playing is essential for children to learn and grow

“Play is behavior that looks as if it has no purpose,” says National Institutes of Health psychologist Dr. Stephen Suomi. “It looks like fun, but it actually prepares kids for a complex social world.”

Research shows that active, creative play benefits just about every aspect of child development. Dr. Roberta Golinkoff, an infant language expert at the University of Delaware, says that “If youngsters lack playtime, their social skills will likely suffer. They will lack the ability to inhibit impulses and to switch tasks easily.” Golinkoff further says, “Play helps young children master their emotions and make their own decisions. It also teaches flexibility, motivation, and confidence.”

“Kids don’t need expensive toys to get a lot out of playtime. Parents are children’s most enriching plaything” says Golinkoff. Playing and talking to babies are vital to their language development. Golinkoff indicates that kids who talk with their parents tend to acquire a vocabulary that will later help them in school. And she advises, let kids guide the conversation. When a parent takes over the conversation, they may shut it down.



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With video screens beckoning children of all ages, free, creative play is curtailed. Parents should encourage active play. Unstructured, creative, physical play lets children burn calories and helps them learn how the world works. In free play, children choose the games, make the rules, learn to negotiate, and release stress. Free play often involves fantasy. For example, if children want to learn about being a fireman, they can imagine it and act out what a fireman does.

Notice the language development that is occurring when you play with your baby or toddler. You are actually playing with your baby just by being responsive to what she/he says or does. Understand “Serve and return”, a term described in an earlier BabyRead article.

And children benefit from just playing on their own. A BabyRead family reported that their 14-month-old sat and “read” a book by talking about it with his 7-year-old sister. They had an extended conversation about the book and used their imaginations to conjure up other characters not in the story.

Golinkoff states “It’s important to engage in a variety of activities, including physical play, social play, and solitary play. The key is that in free play kids are making the decisions. You can’t learn to make decisions if you are always told what to do.”

(All quotes are excerpts from a News in Health issue of the National Institutes of Health, 2019)

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