



PLAY: Why It Matters

PLAY IS OFTEN A FORGOTTEN PART OF BRAIN DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN BUT WHEN WE DELVE INTO THE SCIENCE AND RESEARCH BEHIND PLAY, IT IS A FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCK FOR CHILDREN TO THRIVE, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE COOPED UP AT HOME DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

You've often heard the phrase 'learning through play' but what does that really encompass? It means your child learns—even when it may seem like all they are doing is throwing a ball, squishing some dough, or pretending to make the same meal over, and over, and over again with their pretend kitchen in their pretend restaurant.

Learning through play allows children to develop crucial social skillsets and fundamental developmental growth such as cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing. Through the simple or complex game they role-play as they try to understand the world around them, they learn about trial and error, mirroring, exploration, dexterity, decision-making, interest-building, self-advocacy, creativity, wonder, and joy.

There have been many studies formed around the fundamentals of play, most notably a compilation by the American Academy of Pediatrics that highlights the numerous benefits of play, making it one of the pillars paediatricians encourage parents to pursue.

What does this mean for parents encouraging play in their homes?

What are some of the things to consider that will allow our children to reach their fullest potential through the environments that we nurture?



P - PREPARE

Prepare a space for play. Be clear about the boundaries around play so that your little ones have the absolute freedom and joy to explore. Preparing also sometimes looks like an invitation to play. What are the materials that you have? Are they of high-quality? Do they allow a child to wonder and think or do they do everything for them? A general rule when setting up a playroom is to consider quality over quantity. Less is always more as too much can not only be distracting but also limit their creativity in exploring.

When setting out materials, consider laying out the materials in a way that is easily accessible as an invitation to play. Forget about clunky boxes or drawers filled with junk. Instead, minimise the clutter and busy-ness and select just a few items to display in trays that will immediately invite a child to explore.

To experiment at home, place some building blocks on a tray vs boxing them up in a drawer or to the side and watch how much more your child will interact with the blocks where they are open and inviting vs when they are put inside boxes and forgotten. You'll also notice how little you need when children are allowed to explore the same material in various ways and interpretations. The sky truly is the limit no matter how old they are!



L - LAUGH

While play is primarily child-led, playing together is also a crucial component of play. Building connection and bonding through play isn't just about exploring together but also about developing healthy parent-child as well as peer-to-peer relationships. Through interactions, children learn problem-solving skills, empathy, self-advocacy, how to work in groups, to share and take turns, resolve conflicts and develop competencies that help them build confidence and resilience as they master their world.

For parent-child interactions, view playtime as their domain and allow them to lead. Hold strong boundaries for setting up the rules of play but within that, allow the child to dictate—what to play, how to play, and how long to play. The focus as a parent isn't about the play, the focus as a parent is to just delve into their world and build connection. Laugh!

A – ALLOW

Allow your child to explore. Within the firm safety boundaries held in place, give your child the freedom to imagine, create, wonder, explore, try theories, and most importantly, fail! Let them paint over their pictures in black, or put together random recycled materials and see where their imagination takes them.

Allow little ones to be children, to stick and unstick blue tack for hours or hide in a fort watching the light come through. It may seem like nothing, but this sacred space of wonder, time, and exploration is so incredibly pivotal to their growth. Play is also not always loud, sometimes it is quiet and learning not to interrupt when your child is deep in play is one of the best gifts you can give your little ones (and yourself)! It helps to build their concentration so they can stay at a task even longer because it is innate and coming from within, as opposed to relying on an adult to make all the decision-making— requiring you to be the activity coordinator, clown, and teacher.

Allowing also looks like a mess sometimes. Allow little ones to get dirty, to save and build on bigger projects, to develop ideas, to tear their play area upside down. The boundary is that at the end of playtime, it has to be cleaned up. It will teach them to either pick up as they go (cause and effect) or build on to bigger ideas by allowing them the freedom to create and stay focused.

But within that, explore!



Y – YES SPACE

Whether your child is an infant or school-age, the most important thing you can build for your child is a yes space. What is a yes space? A yes space is a space that your little one can play in in whatever capacity that they can imagine—yes to everything.

The key feature of a yes space however is you have to imagine it as if you hypothetically left your little one in this space and left the house, when you came back a few hours later (completely inadvisable), they may have a wet diaper, be really hungry, but they would otherwise be safe.

Be really sensitive and safety-proof their play area free from hazards—cords that are too long, objects and toys that are age-inappropriate, choking hazards—batteries, magnets, round and hard, things that can be broken off if mouthed, uncovered plug points, and anything that can fall or be tipped over and crush a child.

Another thing to consider for the yes space is the layout. Is there space to move and play? Is it cluttered? Are play objects easily seen and accessible? Is there a focus on passive toys (toys that a child has to manipulate/wonder/think/imagine to play)? Are there different areas to explore or is it mostly just one kind of focus? Even if your child has a strong interest in one area, you want to still make other areas available.



If all else fails, just sit down with your little one. Connect. Play isn't and doesn't have to be complicated. It's connecting, laughing, singing a song together, reading a book, making shapes out of clouds. The importance isn't in the material, the importance is in the wonder. ☺

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