

CHILD'S PLAY IS "GROWING UP WORK"

As adults we often see our children enjoying the care-free days of childhood. We watch children "play" seemingly without purpose. We forget the learning that takes place in simple play activities. Play is the "work" of childhood!

Play is important in the development of your child: emotionally, physically, intellectually and socially.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Play is fun! When your child is having fun, he feels good about himself, his interaction with others and the world around him.

In play, he has the opportunity to fail at a new skill without feeling it was a failure. He is also able to explore different ways to succeed at that skill on his own power. This experience gives him control over his environment and promotes an "I can" approach to life. He will be motivated to learn because of an inner curiosity rather than a desire to please others.

Play also allows a child to work through and overcome fears she is experiencing. In imaginary play, she can become that scary monster in the closet and begin to understand and control her fear.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

This is the area of development we most often identify in play. Running, climbing, pushing a cart and riding a tricycle develop your child's large muscles and enhance her coordination and strength.

When she puts pieces into a puzzle, uses a marker or crayon, plays with playdough or manipulates small toys, she is developing her small muscles or fine motor skills.

INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

"The age in which a child starts to develop academic skills is not the point. Most important is the child's own eagerness to learn and her self-concept. She must feel that she herself is in control of learning."

~ T. Berry Brazelton, M.D.,
[Touchpoints](#)

Children have an inner drive of curiosity. Play gives them the chance to try out new ideas, to problem solve and to meet new challenges. When given a ball, your child may attempt to sit on it, lay on it, taste it, throw it, kick it, bounce it and catch it. Through this experimentation, she is learning about sophisticated physical science properties, such as gravity, movement, weight, density and balance.

Eventually she may also learn that the ball is the color red. Some parents are eager for this type of skill (learning colors, shapes, letters and numbers) without stopping to marvel at the many other incredible concepts their children are learning naturally through play!

In their book, The Ordinary is Extraordinary, Amy Laura Dombro and Leah Wallach, Simon & Schuster 1998, talk about the concept of "quality time."

"Recent child-rearing literature often stresses the importance of 'quality time' – time parents dedicate wholly to their children. The hour you set aside just to teach your child is exciting and valuable for both of you, but it is only a small part of the time you spend with her, and it is not the most important part. Most of your time together is inevitably spent on personal and household routines: changing, dressing and bathing her, cleaning the house, preparing dinner, paying the bills, doing the laundry, reading the paper. These everyday activities are not just necessities that keep you from serious child rearing; they are the best opportunities for learning you can give your child and the most important time you can spend with her, because her chief task in her first three years is precisely to gain command of the day-to-day life you take for granted. "Ordinary time is quality time too."

~ Amy Laura Dombro
and Leah Wallach,
The Ordinary is Extraordinary

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Communication is a large part of learning social skills. And communication begins very early and without spoken words. The first time your eyes meet as newborn and new parent the social interaction development begins. As your child develops, the time spent with you in "conversations" will be most rewarding for both parent and child. Speaking, listening and interacting with others will be important parts of the social development process.

Playtime with your child provides many rich language opportunities. He may bring a toy or object to you many times during the day. Respond to this interest of his and talk about it with him. He will enjoy the attention and learn new language skills as well. Remember that words take on meaning as children hear them used naturally in the course of daily life.

In play, your child not only enjoys imitating you but now also learns by imitating other children. This is a good time to introduce him to one or two playmates. He may not interact and cooperate in play with another toddler. Instead he will play alongside another child and imitate behaviors. You will see him grow in this skill during his preschool years.

WHAT IS MY ROLE AS A PARENT IN MY CHILD'S PLAY?

Many adults find it difficult to develop an attitude of playfulness. It's not always easy to don a red cape and be Superman. It is more comfortable for parents to direct the playtime with their children. "Let's build a house with the blocks." "Here's what this toy is supposed to do." When parents always direct the interaction, it may take the creativity and adventure out of play.

To enhance your child's play, allow her to be the creator, the experimenter and the major problem solver. You should follow her lead in the play activities. She chooses the activities, determines how the activities are to proceed, and controls the direction of the conversation. You will need to provide safe boundaries.

WHEN CAN I FIND TIME TO PLAY WITH MY CHILD?

Children can and should play alone or with other children. However, your involvement, whether in small or large amounts of time, makes good play-time better. Busy parents often find it difficult to set aside time for play. Daily routines provide opportunities for learning and play! Getting dressed, making meals, doing laundry, cleaning the house, going to the grocery are the endless jobs that must be done in our everyday lives as adults. We often dread these activities, but to our children these everyday tasks are fascinating opportunities to learn through play.

"Everyday activities aren't very interesting to us precisely because we do them every day, over and over. We walk to the bus stop, do the laundry, make coffee, for the most part without paying much attention, our minds elsewhere." "But to a small child, our chores are intriguing performances: fresh, complex and absorbing. For children, the mundane is new, unclassified territory, and it's magical. They set about exploring every day by collecting, organizing and reorganizing information about their bodies and their environment, about people and how people behave and communicate with one another." "To learn, they need practice. Routines give them the opportunity to observe the same sights, sounds, smells and behaviors until they make sense of them; to make the same movements until they can coordinate confidently; to hear and use the same words until they can take possession of them."

~ Amy Laura Dombro
and Leah Wallach,

[The Ordinary is Extraordinary](#)

To support your child's natural curiosity to learn, look at these activities through his eyes. You will find opportunities to play in the ordinary! When possible, include your child in daily routines. There is no better way of showing him respect and helping him feel good about himself than by making him your partner in everyday activities. When your child "helps" in these activities, expect the job to go at a slower pace and with some mess!

Remember, there is nothing you can buy your child, no class you can enroll her in that is more important than the experience she will get from participation in everyday family life.

EVERYDAY ROUTINES BECOME EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

OFFER CHOICES

Whenever possible, offer your child realistic, manageable choices such as, "Would you like to eat a pear or a peach?" or, "Would you like to take your bath before or after supper?" Learning to be a good decision-maker takes lots of practice.

ASSIGN TASKS

Give her "real" jobs to do such as setting the table, carrying the bag of paper towels home from the store and fluffing up the sofa pillows when you clean the living room. She will feel proud and competent to be a valued and contributing member of the family.

TAKING A BATH

The bathtub is a laboratory that invites children to explore and experiment with water, a fascinating substance. Toys such as plastic funnels, margarine containers and measuring spoons encourage pouring and can help to illustrate such concepts as full, half-full and empty. Corks and metal spoons invite discoveries about what floats and what sinks. Bathtub conversation lends itself easily to naming body parts. Children begin by learning the basics such as: head, legs and arms. When these are mastered, introduce elbow, eyebrow and forehead.

Safety Note: The bathtub can be a dangerous place. Drowning is a leading cause of death among young children. Always keep an eye on your children as they bathe. **Never leave a young child alone in a bathtub.**

SETTING THE TABLE

Let toddlers carry unbreakables such as napkins or place mats to the table.

Encourage older preschoolers to help you count out how many people will be eating and how many plates and cups you need. This helps with the concept of number: children will learn to place one of each item for each person.

Children three to five-years-old will enjoy folding napkins into different shapes. Younger children will enjoy it, too, if you don't mind some napkins being crumpled into balls or torn into shreds.

Setting the table is a perfect opportunity for preschoolers to begin learning about "right" and "left" as they set out the silverware.

Encourage children ages 2 years and up to help sort the items to be washed. Afterward, let them try to pair up the socks.

Preschoolers are developing a sense of ownership. You may want to ask them to help deliver each family member's clothes to the right bedroom. This is a real life "matching game."

GOING TO THE SUPERMARKET

Name the foods you see. Words such as banana, cashew, broccoli and cinnamon are fun to say.

Children two to five-years-old enjoy having their own shopping list. You may want to illustrate the list or have children draw a picture of the item they are going to look for. If the item is easy to reach and unbreakable, let your child take it from the shelf and place it in your cart or basket.

Encourage children to help you count pears, peaches or apples as you take turns dropping them in a bag.

The produce department presents countless opportunities to categorize by size, shape and color.

Point out signs hanging over the aisles, labels on cans, print on boxes to children beginning to identify letters and sound out words.

Discussions about the fact that Denise likes cauliflower and Sammy doesn't conveys the important message that people are unique individuals – each to be respected for who they are.

DOING THE LAUNDRY

Working together to carry the filled laundry basket to the machine is a terrific lesson about cooperation.

Talk about the textures of clothes. Words like "scratchy," "silky" and "knobby" are fun to say. They can easily lead to rhymes or silly songs conveying the message that language is pleasurable.