

Building Play Skills for Healthy Children & Families



What is play, and why is it important?

Play is defined as “any spontaneous or organized activity that provides enjoyment, entertainment, amusement or diversion” (Parham and Fazio, 2008, p. 448). Play is one of children’s major occupations—how they occupy their free time and learn. It is an important activity for your child because play helps to facilitate positive growth and development. Physical health, social and emotional well-being, and positive mental health are promoted through play. When a child plays, he or she experiences new ways to solve problems and learn skills needed to become a healthy adult. Research has shown that children who participate in play frequently grow quickly, experience higher achievement in school, and develop healthy habits for adulthood. A comparative study of 11,000 third graders found that those who participated in more than 15 minutes of recess per day behaved better in the classroom and were more likely to learn than their peers who had little to no recess opportunities. (Barros, Silver, & Stein, 2009). Using daily routines and activities throughout the day, encouraging the happiness and joy that can be experienced through play, and simply allowing children to be playful can enhance their health and well-being.

How can families develop play skills to promote health and well-being?

Early childhood

Play teaches infants, toddlers, and preschoolers about their bodies and about the effects of their actions on the world around them. Play promotes growth and development through movement and exploration. Family members are the child’s first playmates.

- During their first few months, babies enjoy colorful mobiles, rattles, vocal play such as talking and singing, and games involving moving their arms and legs. Encourage your baby to participate while lying on his or her back, belly, or side, or while supported on your lap.

- As babies learn to reach, grasp, and sit on their own, they enjoy mirror play, balls, and toys that involve squeezing, stacking, and pulling apart. Babies also enjoy interactive games like peek-a-boo, music, and books. Water play with toys that float and plastic letters to stick on tile walls provides bathtime fun.
- Because babies enjoy and learn through putting toys in their mouths, make sure they play with toys that are age specific and are made without small parts.
- As children learn to walk and run, they enjoy chasing and hide-’n-peek, climbing, and pull toys.
- Toddlers develop hand skills by dropping shape toys into slots and scribbling with crayons. They also enjoy books and toys that make sounds. They begin to imitate by using, for example, a toy telephone or hammer.
- Imitation and pretend play increases during the preschool years, through use of dress-up, puppets, and toy cars and trains. Preschoolers enjoy construction games such as building toys and puzzles, which further develop their coordination skills. They enjoy playground time and riding toys. They play with materials with different textures such as finger paints and sand. Games during the preschool years teach turn-taking and getting along with others. These activities also help children develop language skills.

Elementary school

The elementary school years are an important time for learning to play by rules and participating in cooperative activities such as sports teams. Motor skills are being fine tuned, and there is an increased interest in developing hobbies. Play often serves as a way of developing friendships and expressing one’s unique personality. Finding a balance between formal play (e.g., participating on a sports team) and informal play (e.g., participating on the playground) allows for play time to be both active and creative.

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Try these ideas to build skills and expression:

- Participate in board games and sports activities with your child; this helps your child to learn to follow rules.
- Have various craft materials readily available to spark creativity and interest.
- Offer options for extracurricular activities that include both physical and creative exploration (e.g., sports teams or performing arts experiences).
- Provide play opportunities that include both structured and less structured choices (e.g., being on a school team or playing soccer in the backyard with neighborhood friends).
- Encourage your school to support recess as a necessary part of every child's day. This is a good time for physical movement that can promote learning and positive behavior.
- Like recess, active play before homework time can prepare your child for learning.
- Don't forget to keep play activities fun! If you lose that element, it is no longer play.

Middle School

The early teen years mark a time of exploring social relationships. This is teens' form of play. Teens tend to like group activities, such as spending time with friends, listening to music, talking, and going to the mall. This time with friends allows them to improve social, movement, and mental skills; gain an understanding of themselves as individuals; and practice new skills in different environments without continuous parental supervision. These opportunities can promote a sense of well-being. Young and older teens also enjoy after-school activities, such as clubs (drama, music, art, athletics) and work (volunteer and paid).

- Encourage your child to join school and community-based clubs and after-school activities.
- Participate in leisure activities with your teen, such as table tennis or biking, to help strengthen family ties and offer opportunities to build communication.
- Ask questions about your child's preferences in movies or music to indicate your interest and to spark conversation.
- Consider your own habits and routines of leisure and whether they include physical activities and model a balanced lifestyle of work and play. You are a role model for your teen.

High School and Beyond

During the high school years, play promotes cooperation and opportunities for teamwork. Through play, older teenagers are able to get to know themselves better and pinpoint their inter-

ests and strengths. As school and social pressures increase at the high school level and beyond, leisure activities can reduce stress, and offer a sense of belonging and a chance to develop their goals. Encourage your teen to balance homework with leisure time to promote a healthy lifestyle addressing both mental and physical wellness.

- Encourage limited screen time (TV, computers, MP3 players) and increased physical activity to help prevent or reduce problems associated with obesity and depression.
- Find a good fit between the demands of the leisure activity and the skills and interests of your teen. For example, depending on your child's personality, physical abilities, and interests, he or she may prefer more physically demanding activities like swimming, whereas other children may prefer debate or drama clubs that challenge verbal and other cognitive skills.
- For all age groups, offer healthy, balanced meals as the fuel needed for physical activity.
- To prevent injury for all age groups, be mindful about the use and proper maintenance of appropriate safety equipment, such as helmets for biking. Know the signs of concussion. Encourage stretching before and after vigorous exercise.
- Low-cost, easily accessible leisure pursuits such as chess and basketball offer lifelong participation through community leagues and recreational centers.

Play helps to build coordination and strength as well as creativity and social skills. Play also helps to develop emotional well-being and increases a child's ability to explore, problem solve, and create. Occupational therapy practitioners are important health care providers who value play in families, schools, and communities. They assess all areas of activity to promote health, growth, and development. They are skilled at observing, identifying, and developing play strategies and healthy habits for children and their families and building towards successful participation in adulthood. Occupational therapy services help babies, children, and adolescents live life to its fullest. ■

References

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