

## Why Play is So Very Important

Ask any young child what happened at school. You will almost always get the same answer: "Played." And when you visit school you are apt to have the same overall impression: "They're just playing."

But don't be misled by that word "play."

Children in early childhood groups do play — no question about that. But they don't play games with rules and scores and teams, the way older youngsters play. Young children's "play" isn't that kind.

And their play isn't like that of grown-ups playing golf or bridge. Young children's play isn't recreation. It isn't a dessert when the day's work is done. It isn't a change of pace.

Nor is their play giggles and laughter. Young children playing are very intent and earnest. The word "play" usually suggests killing time and fooling around but young children's "play" — there ought to be a better word for it! — is very serious business.

Young children "play" with playthings: with paints, clay, riding their trikes, climbing, building with blocks, in the sandbox, with their dolls, doing puzzles, on the swings, on the slide, on the junglegym . . .

But young children "play" even when they are busy with ordinary, realistic, down-to-earth activities: when they are toileting, taking a bath, feeding an animal . . . Listen and you suddenly realize: they're not all here! . . . their minds are elsewhere. They are "playing." Young children can have their feet on the ground at the same time that the rest of their body and soul is imagining, pretending and making-believe.

This is the unique characteristic of the under-Six age: It lives in two worlds. One we call "the real world." But the other world often is even more real to the young child: the *private* world, the "play world," the world within the boy or girl's mind.

You and I see a chair. A chair is to sit on. That is *one* world.

The young child sees a chair. A chair is to sit on *and* a chair is a horse, a plane, a boat, a car, a bus, a house, a cave, a garage . . .

Anything can be anything in the child's own personal "play" world. Anybody can be anybody and anybody can do anything: "I must be the boss and you must be the worker. And you must do what I tell you . . ."

Anybody can be anybody, anybody can do anything; even nobodies who don't exist can do anything! In their special world young children often talk to people who really aren't there. They have make-believe friends whom we can't see at all!

Why? What's the good of this very different, under-Six kind of play?

This play serves three very important purposes in nourishing the young child's development. First and foremost: *Play promotes very significant mental capacities.* It stretches the attention span. It builds the child's vocabulary. It develops perseverance. And most important: Play is the young child's distinctive way of beginning to organize ideas and to plan and to think.



Watch a youngster at an easel. The child consciously, carefully, deliberately puts red exactly where he or she wants the red to go. That is "play" and that is thinking.

Listen to a child on top of a junglegym: "This must be our house and I must be the mother." That is "play" and that is a child with a plan, a child with an idea.

Whether the child speaks the words out loud or simply thinks them, in play the child always feels: "I have an idea." The idea doesn't have to be our grown-up kind of idea; the chair doesn't have to look like a horse or smell like a horse. Later, when the child is older, ideas will have to meet the harsh test of reality, and the child will want them to. Now, when the child is under age Six what counts is that the child thought up the idea. It is "play" and it is the beginning of thinking. The notion can surprise you but the fact is: "Play" — happy-sounding, seemingly easy-going — involves very vigorous intellectual activity.

Play serves a second important purpose in development: *Play is the young child's emotional equalizer.* Every young child meets some blows and disappointments, even under the best of conditions. Inevitably, adults are busy . . . time passes slowly . . . toys break or get lost . . . day becomes night . . . Young children need some defenses against the realities of life, and "Play" does that job.

Through play children can feel more loved, more cared for, more protected, whenever any of these feelings would make life a little sweeter. All they have to do is say: "I must be the baby" . . . "I must be sick" . . . "I must be your prisoner" . . .

Just as easily, through play children can feel more important, more powerful, more impressive, whenever any of these feelings would make life more pleasant. It is easy to do: "I must be the driver" . . . "Giddyap horsey, go, go" . . . "I must be the conductor. I collect the tickets" . . .

*Play turns children into social human beings* — that is the third contribution to development. Children do play alone at times, even in school

groups, but usually "play" means people. It means listening to what the other children say; it means speaking up for your ideas. It means going along with what the others do; it means persuading others to follow you.

Play times are practice sessions in not being too bossy, not being selfish or grabby and not being too meek or too mild or too shy. "Play" starts a child on the way to becoming civilized — a companion, a contributor.

Play brings so much good to young children — it is built so deeply into their bones — that it goes on, for better or worse, whether we adults nourish it or not. But our support for children's play is important. Without it, the play can run downhill. It can become repetitive — the same old activity over and over again. Or play can become wild and out-of-bounds. Or the urge to play can be pushed down within the child, submerged exclusively into day-dreaming.

What can we do to help? Children don't need our ideas or direction from us — child play has to be *their* idea. But we can help by being sure that children have the space that play needs at home and at school. We can help by providing the age-mates that make play richer. We can help by making available the kinds of materials that let play flow easily: blocks, sand, clay, paints, dolls, dress-up clothes . . .

We help most of all simply by believing in the worth and in the importance of play. The temptation is to become impatient with an activity so misleadingly named. Now that they are in school, the temptation is to push children into "serious things," forgetting how serious play is to them. The temptation is to prize only achievements and accomplishments that *we* can recognize, ignoring the basic contributions to mental and emotional and social development that play makes.

If you find yourself tempted to minimize child play, keep this in mind: It grows and blossoms and blooms only in this particular under-Six span of years. For that short span in life it touches almost all the activities that fill up almost all the minutes of the child's day. We ought to think twice before taking too lightly something so impressive.

Distributed to parents by:

