



## The Family Place Parent Child Center

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# Play: The Work of Children



Play is as important as wholesome food and adequate rest in the healthy development of children, and should be as much a part of the daily routine as meals and bedtime. The only real necessities for play are time, space and the freedom for it to evolve. It can happen inside, outside, structured or free-form, rambunctiously or quietly, alone or with others.

While planned activities can add interesting elements to play, too much scheduling can actually become a stressor. Children play spontaneously - no one has to tell them to do it. They play because it's fun! It allows them the freedom to be curious

and to explore their ideas about things. It stimulates their curiosity and stirs their imagination. They can pretend anything they can imagine, all while learning valuable life skills. Developing the imagination can empower children to consider new and inventive ideas and contribute to self-confidence as they envision themselves competent and able to accomplish their hopes and dreams.

In free play new ideas get explored and processed in manageable ways. Children express and work out emotional aspects of everyday experiences, and practice at self-direction. Mastery comes through repetition.

Play is an active form of learning that unites the mind, body, and spirit, and every one of the human senses may be engaged. Unstructured physical play is a developmentally appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children's lives, and research shows that physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness. Play reduces the tension that often comes with having to achieve or needing to learn. In play, adults do not interfere and children relax. Learning often occurs best when the whole self is involved in play.

As they develop and mature, children grow into new levels of play - from flexible, open-ended explorations and parallel play to pretend and sophisticated role-playing, collaborating with peers and introducing rules. Babies engage in playful exchanges as soon as they are awake for long enough periods to interact with those

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around them. Everything they touch, hear, smell, see and taste triggers new brain connections, and pleasurable experiences challenge them to engage again. Learning through play can foster a love for learning.

Children permitted to play freely with peers develop skills for seeing things through another person's point of view - cooperating, helping, sharing, and solving problems. While adults are available to facilitate when necessary and engage when invited, children should be allowed to take the lead.

When we give children the time and space to explore the world through play, we give them a powerful life-long gift. Play is fun, but it is also meaningful and complex, allowing children to learn about themselves and their world, gaining knowledge, skill and confidence through discovery and practice.

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