

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Play is a very important part of childhood. Play allows children to explore their environment, process their experiences, and just simply enjoy life as a kid. Some children, especially those who have been abused or neglected, have not had the chance to play and enjoy childhood.

So what can you do to encourage your child to play? A lot of people think that you need to have special games, flashcards, or toys to help a child learn and develop through play. But research actually suggests that just allowing a child to play within their own environment is just as effective. Just let them hang out and play. As the adult, you can provide supervision, but remember to allow your child to “lead” the play.

Here are some tips to helping your child enjoy play:

- Allow your child some unstructured time to play. It is amazing what kids can come up with on their own. You don't have to always have a plan about what activity to do.
- Encourage outdoor play. Build a fort, play tag or hide and seek, or kick a soccer ball around. Your child might have a great idea that you never imagined.
- Provide materials for play. Something as simple as plastic containers and boxes can entertain young children for hours. For older kids, you can give them some blank paper, crayons, old magazines, scissors, markers, and glue. Instead of a model craft project – just provide some materials and see what happens!
- Encourage independent play. Some children do better playing alone than others, so you will need to know your child and what they can handle.
- Have a family fun night! Pick one night a week when it's all about fun and play. You might want to play a board game, watch a movie, or go to the park. Whatever it is, try to make the rules minimal (mostly just about safety), and encourage creativity and fun. Let your child help plan this special night that is just for play and have fun.
- Limit the amount of time that your child watches TV and/or plays video games. While these can be fun and entertaining, they do not provide as much opportunity for creativity and learning as free play does. Don't be surprised if you notice some angry or sad themes in your child's play. Playing is natural a way for your child to process what she has been through. You may find that your child's doll doesn't live with her parents, or that there is a lot of fighting in the fort he is building. You do not always have to put a stop to this, but do observe and listen for anything that could be affecting your child in a negative way.

Some of the above information was adapted from “*The Truth About Play*” by Rebecca Parlakian & Claire Lerner, published by Zero to Three, September 2009 and “*The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*” by Kenneth Ginsburg, published by American Academy of Pediatrics, January 2007.

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