

The Power of Play: Why It Matters for Your Child's Growth



Highlights

Play is crucial for developing creativity, motor and social skills, and problem-solving abilities.

Unstructured play is the most beneficial type of play.

Always supervise your child and create a safe play environment.

In This Article

Why Play Matters for Children

How Children Typically Play

Types of Play That Help Your Child Thrive

Tips for Playing with Your Child

Finding the Right Time for Play

Keeping Playtime Safe

Should My Child Have Screen Time?

Tools And Assistance

Why Play Matters for Children

Play is one of the main ways children and toddlers learn about themselves and

other people.

Play is important for brain development. It gives your child the opportunity to use their imagination and practice new skills such as:

- decision making
- gross and fine motor skills
- social skills in language and communication

The skills your baby learns in their early years continue to be built on throughout their childhood.

When your child has fun during play and tries different activities, it helps form connections in their brain.

Play also helps your child to:

- feel happy, secure and safe
- learn how their body works and what they can do
- learn about the natural world and the environment
- exercise and maintain a healthy weight

Play also allows your child to:

- test risky behaviours in a safe and supervised way
- build confidence and relate with other children of the same age

How Children Typically Play

Most young children tend to 'parallel play.' This is when they play at the same time, rather than with each other.

As your child moves into the preschool years, they will start to play more cooperatively with you and other children.

When playing with your child, practice sharing and taking turns. This can help your child learn that other people have feelings too.

Types of Play That Help Your Child Thrive

Unstructured Play

Unstructured play is when your child decides what they want to play and when. Young children may need your help getting started with play activities, but they are best left to their own decision-making once they're organised.

Some examples of unstructured play include:

providing painting, drawing, and craft activities and leaving the child to manage themselves

a dress-up corner with a variety of tops, scarves, hats, and pants

outdoor play equipment that is child-safe and accessible

a toy box with age-appropriate toys

cubbies made from large boxes or a sheet draped over a table

Structured Play

Structured play is when an adult directs a child's play.

Some examples of structured play include:

swimming classes, playgroups, library storytime

reading and looking at books together

dance, music, or drama classes

board games played with others

puzzles and sorting games

Outside Play

Some examples of outside play are:

physical play on swings and slides, in sandpits, and with toys like balls

messy play with buckets, mud, water, and sand

Try not to let the weather control your child's play. Dress your child in a raincoat and puddle boots during wet weather.

Playing in wet weather can be special for your child and help them get creative. This can change a quiet day inside into a fun and unique outdoor experience.

Indoor Play

Some examples of indoor play are:

a dress-up area where they can practice their imaginative and creative play
drawing and scribbling with crayons, coloured pencils, and paints
colourful, safe toys of different shapes, which are entertaining and fun
reading

Drawing and scribbling can help your child develop fine motor skills, which are important when learning to write.

It is good to read with your toddler every day. You can:

set up a reading corner for your child with soft cushions and a range of books
join a library
give books as presents
let your child see you reading

Tips for Playing with Your Child

When playing with your child, just be yourself and aim to have fun. Spending time with them and having fun will help them feel loved.

You can look for simple games that don't require a lot of money or planning. You can also use things around the house that are safe for your child to play with.

When your child has had enough of a particular activity and needs a break, let them. Play should be fun, not a chore.

Try not to expect too much of your child. They are still learning how to share and be thoughtful.

Finding the Right Time for Play

As a parent, you'll have lots of demands on your time, but it's worth looking for time each day just for fun with your child.

Play can happen at specific times, such as during playgroup, or just throughout the day and evening.

Some children seem to struggle with playing on their own and want a parent to always play with them. Setting up an activity and getting them started can help. Give them encouraging messages that they're doing well on their own.

Knowing when to offer help and when to step back is a skill you will develop over time.

Keeping Playtime Safe

Young children cannot tell when something is unsafe. Your toddler will rely on you to always check their environment for safety.

It's impossible to remove every potential hazard from your home. However, restricting your child's access to dangers is a priority. Be sure to:

- supervise your child while they play
- arrange areas of your home where your child can play safely
- remove any hazards where they play
- use childproof gates and latches to restrict their access to unsafe areas and prevent falls
- lock up poisons, chemicals, and medicines
- use plug-in covers on electrical switches
- make sure your pool is fenced and that your child can't get near water, which can pose a risk of drowning

You can try using a home safety checklist.

Should My Child Have Screen Time?

Screen time includes:

watching television
using a smartphone, tablet, or computer

Children aged 2 to 5 years should have less than 2 hours of screen time per day.

Tools And Assistance

Here are some practical tools and ideas to support your child's play and development:

Toy rotation: Periodically rotate toys to keep your child interested and engaged.

Play boxes: Create themed boxes (e.g., "construction", "art", or "pretend play") to make playtime more exciting and easy to initiate.

Home safety checklist: Use a checklist to make sure play areas are safe and free from hazards.

Local resources: Libraries, community centres, and parenting groups often offer structured play activities or lend toys and books.

Books about play: Age-appropriate books about imaginative play or emotions can encourage creative thinking.

DIY play ideas: Use everyday household items for creative play - cardboard boxes, pots, pans, scarves, etc.