

## The Importance of Play

Why do we humans play? From our earliest moments, we **long** to play. The appeal of play is the joy that it brings us. The sheer delight of it! However, joy is not the only reward of play. Through play we develop the cognitive, social, physical, and emotional skills we will need to thrive. Nature has provided us with play as a way to explore and make sense of our world. Play is our teacher.

Through the use of pretend play, for example, a child can alter their reality, creating wonderful new worlds to explore. When a child serves a pretend dinner to their stuffed animals, turns a cardboard box into a pirate ship or makes a tent out of blankets and chairs, they are expanding their imagination, taking on new roles, developing problem-solving skills, stimulating curiosity and increasing creativity, allowing for increased self-expression.

During a game of "Follow the Leader" a child unknowingly participates in a practical lesson in tolerance and cooperation. By interacting with others in play a child is given the opportunity to build essential skills such as sharing, turn taking, empathy, and self-regulation, as well as learning how to establish and maintain relationships through negotiation and conflict-resolution.

The benefits of physical play are obvious. What could be healthier than running around, laughing and screaming? When they participate in physical play children are working muscles, expanding lungs and pumping oxygen-rich blood through their bodies. These activities enhance the development of gross and fine motor skills, relieve stress and increase overall physical fitness. Unfortunately, the increasing number of over-weight, out-of-shape children in our society has become an epidemic. Today, more than ever, kids need the opportunity to "blow-off steam" and run-off excess energy. Physical play allows them to do that in a way that is fun and exhilarating!

Play is also critical in the emotional development of the child. It promotes independence, increases self-confidence and provides an emotional outlet for the child to express their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment. Our fondest memories of childhood are the times when we were faced with new challenges and were able to face our fears and overcome them. Do you remember that feeling, half terror and half delight, when you first pushed-off on your bike without training wheels, or the first time you jumped into the deep end of the swimming pool, or the first time you hit the ball in Little League? These memories are so powerful that they stay with us for the rest of our lives. This is the power of play!

It is important to add, however, that the child is not the only beneficiary of play. It also imparts important gifts to the caregiver. It can foster the bonds between

them and the child, improving physical and emotional wellbeing for them both. It is also a great way for caregivers to observe the learning styles and developmental rate of the child. Invaluable information can be gleaned simply by observing a child at play.

Unfortunately, in a misguided attempt to better prepare our children for an increasingly competitive world, our society has **de-valued** play. Schools are cutting back, and, in some cases, eliminating physical education, recess time and the Arts to concentrate more on academic achievement. A growing number of people believe that playtime is frivolous, and takes time away from more "important" studies. Instead, they should realize that play is an essential component in our efforts to **enhance** our children's ability to learn and grow. It is the mission of the **Center for Creative Play** to give children of all backgrounds and abilities the opportunity to do this. Come play, learn and grow together...with us!

## SOURCES

Creative Expression and Play in Early Childhood, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition Isenberg, J.P. & Jalongo, M.R., (2001) Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle, NJ

Early Childhood Newsletter (May 2001)

The Essence of Play Chandler, B.E. (1997) The American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc., Bethesda, MD

From Neurons to Neighborhoods Shonkoff, J.P. & Phillips, D.A., Editors (2000) National Academy Press, Washington, DC

"The Importance of Play in Your Pre-Schooler's Life" Armstrong, Thomas, Ph.D.  
<http://www.tnpc.com/parentalk/preschoolers/presch7.html>

"The Importance of Play" The Institute for Play Web Site  
[http://www.instituteforplay.com/5importance\\_of\\_play.htm](http://www.instituteforplay.com/5importance_of_play.htm)

Learn to Play Stagnitti, Karen (1998) Co-ordinates Publications, West Brunswick Victoria, Australia

"Core Beliefs" Playing For Keeps Web Site  
[http://www.playingforkeeps.org/site/about\\_05.html](http://www.playingforkeeps.org/site/about_05.html)

Play in the Lives of Children Rogers, C.S. & Sawers, J.K. (1988) National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, DC