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Play and Your Child's Development

Michigan State University

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Home and Family Series

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**PLAY and
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development**

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Children spend a great deal of their early life in what we adults call "play." We sometimes wish we could have fun in the same all-absorbing way in which children enjoy playing. To children play is fun too, but it is also their business. It's an end in itself to them, but it is also their way of learning many the skills they need in order to cope with the tasks of life. Play helps them release tensions and anxieties, too.

Creativity is a great need among people today in order for them to use their imaginations, intellects, and bodies to live fully and enjoy each experience and day to the utmost. Our world needs creative people, too, to solve problems; to bring beauty, health, knowledge, security and well-being to all people. The materials and experiences we provide, the toys we select or make, the encouragement, love and guidance we give to our children can help them live creatively.

Watching television and seeing other people perform in music, sports, dramatics have some value, but are not substitutes for active participation. Give your child the chance to be a doer; that's the way children learn to get along in the world.

This bulletin discusses the ways in which play helps a child's development and gives suggestions for ways parents can contribute to children's play.

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PLAY and your child's development

PLAY

To young children, play is the most important thing in life. It even comes before eating and sleeping at times. In it they try themselves out. They select naturally the plaything that will help their stage of development most.

AIDS DEVELOPMENT

They learn to work and immediately begin to pull trains or a cart across the floor. They are building strong leg muscles that will help them grow. They learn to use the large muscles of their arms and begin to throw everything within reach. They pick things up and drop them. They take spool boards apart and put them back together again. They are learning to manage their fingers. In play, they gain skills in managing their bodies.

Children learn much about the world about them while playing. They want to handle your glasses, the curtains, the ice in a glass. They want to taste the soap, the flowers, the soil you are spading. They take pans out of the cupboard, clothes out of the chest of drawers. They have a great eagerness to know how everything feels and tastes.

In play, children learn that some toys are heavier than others, that different sized blocks will not fit together. They learn that a rubber ball bounces, a boat floats, water can be poured from a cup, a bucket holds water but a box doesn't. They learn to recognize colors and to imitate what other people do. They come to know they will fall, if their balance

is poor. They become afraid of things that will hurt. Sometimes they get pleasure from playing with the group. There they learn how to get others to cooperate. They become conscious of how sharing works.

BUILDS THE MINDS OF CHILDREN

Children can concentrate on play, if they have much free-play time without interruption. Concentration helps children solve many problems in their play. They can build the blocks into a house that will stand. They will probably fail at first, but with time, by trial and error they succeed.

Play offers many problems for solution: How to fit parts of the puzzle into the right spots; how to dress and undress the doll; how to remember to keep pedaling so as not to fall off the new, two-wheeled bike; how to take turns at using play equipment; how to share ideas with playmates. Children will not be able to solve some problems, of course, until their minds and bodies can work together - can coordinate. This must wait on physical development. Play does much to help this coordination.

HELPS THEM MAKE DECISIONS

Children's minds are developed through creative play - in making something out of things at hand. Creative play will come naturally to most children, if they are surrounded with proper tools. The "do-with" type of play equipment makes it

necessary that a child decide what to do with it. "Do-with" things are blocks, sand, water, cans or boxes that nest, fingerpaint, crayons, plain paper, materials for crafts, costumes, rhythm instruments, kits for keeping store. With these, children can experiment to their hearts' content.

The mechanical toy winds up and rattles across the floor. It is not creative. It leaves nothing for children to do but sit and watch. The real fun in play comes from doing or making something with the things they have to play with - from the feeling of having mastered materials at hand.



Fig. 1 - Making choice of toy provides early lesson in making wise choices.

EASES TENSIONS

Play life of children can help them gain emotional balance. They get satisfaction from learning to control their bodies and to build a good house of blocks. This makes them happy people. They learn to like the beauty of colors, the melody rhythm of music. They overcome the fear they feel when swinging high or riding fast. With fingerpaint and a piece of paper they can put down what they feel - They can get the feelings out!

If children are allowed to play permissively (as they wish) with dolls or stuffed animals, they are likely to express their anger or hurt. In many ways, wholesome play will help them to make an adjustment to life. They can express feelings that they dare not show in everyday living. In play they are free from the domination they experience in the adult world about them.



Fig. 2 - "Do-With" toys foster creativeness.

CAN FORM GOOD HABITS

Play can be a means of helping children form good habits. If the playroom atmosphere is permissive (free) enough, they can learn perseverance and originality. Besides, they can be taught respect of property and the rights of others. This comes from seeing that no one else uses their playthings without their permission. Habits of orderliness can grow out of having a place for toys and help in putting them away at the end of the play period or before they go to bed at night.

PARENTS' CONTRIBUTION TO CHILD'S PLAY

Play can be a very meaningful thing for children. This will not just happen of course. A parent "sets the stage" so that the child will be able to develop to the fullest through play experiences. The following paragraphs suggest some of the things that you, as a parent, can do to make your children's play more meaningful.

KEEPING INFORMED

Read about and study your children's development. Try to learn what they are capable of and what they need to learn. Know the benefits they can get from different toys and play equipment.



Fig. 3 - Playing alone helps children develop initiative.

INTEREST IN YOUNGSTERS' PLAY

Have a genuine interest in your youngsters' play. They may want to play alone at times but they want to feel you are interested in them and in what they are doing. Help them to get started playing alone - for those times when they must play alone. When school begins and they are the only children at home, if they know how to play well alone, they will get over being lonesome.

FAMILY FUN

Develop a habit for a set time for playing as a family, even when children are young. This means that you will have to schedule your work so as to be free when other family members are free. It means also that the play must be something that even the youngest can take part in. Listening to good music, acting out nursery rhymes, singing, playing games (as ring toss or basket quoits) are a few pastimes that are suitable for any age.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Avoid forcing children to take part in any activity, no matter how much you may feel it will benefit them. There may be good reasons why they don't take part.



Fig. 4 - Active play helps build muscles.

For example, they may not be able to because they cannot coordinate mind and body or they may be afraid of something. And don't discuss it; the less said about it the better. Given time, they will likely come to enjoy the activity.

STORAGE FOR TOYS

Provide a place for each child's toys. Space in their own room is best. Shelves with well-loved toys in sight make the room more attractive to them. A closet with shelves within reach may help to keep order. A low drawer often can hold the train and its track. Maybe you will want to make a set of shelves from several apple or orange crates put together lengthwise. A coat of paint on them will work wonders! The alcove under the stairs might house a tricycle, hobby horse or roller skates.

VARIED PLAY

See that children get different play experiences throughout the day - quiet play, active play, creative play, group play and make-believe play. Mornings may be a good time for active, outdoor play for the preschool child. The school child needs some active play, preferably outdoors after school hours to make up for a quiet day in school. Before bed or nap time is a good time for quiet play to help calm or relax a child. Part of a child's play should be with a group, although at times they need to play alone.

GROUP PLAY

Provide opportunity for play with other children. Remember that the nearer playmates are in age, the more benefit they receive from group experience. Forming a neighborhood play-group with your neighbors two or three mornings a week is a fine thing.

IDEAS UP YOUR SLEEVE

Keep one or two ideas up your sleeve for the time when the youngster seems unable to think of anything to do. A few that you might try at such times are these:

- 1-Turn a chair over and let the child have some rubber fruit jar rings to toss over a leg.
- 2-With a hat, a badge and the garden hose they can pretend the flowers are on fire and they are firemen.
- 3-Mix starch and water and furnish a brush to paint the fence. The rain will wash it off.
- 4-Tie a cord on the end of a stick and let them fish in a bucket or dishpan of water.
- 5-Hitch the wagon and tricycle together to make a train. The dolls are the passengers and the child the conductor. Pieces of paper are tickets. A punch can be used to mark the tickets.
- 6-Color a little cooked starch and let them paint a picture on a piece of plain paper.
- 7-Let them string pieces of macaroni on twine or yarn. Help in threading the darning needle. They might color the macaroni with wax crayons and make a bracelet or necklace of it.
- 8-Let them practice for the track meet by seeing how far or how high they can jump.



Fig. 5 - Group play teaches sharing.

"MAKE BELIEVE"

Encourage children to enjoy "make-believe." Games to "make-believe" will help to develop a lively imagination. Few people succeed in life without imagination. Children will most likely be quite ready to pretend they are mailmen, storekeepers or any other individual they know. Encourage them by accepting them in the parts they are playing. Invite the mailman to lunch with you rather than saying, "Let's quit pretending and eat our lunch."



Fig. 6 - Some play helps a child develop imagination.

Children will have a lot of fun making a cage for a wild animal - wrapping string around the card table that is upside down on the floor. Playing store with a box for a counter and a few cans of food from the pantry shelf will please them greatly. You might provide money and help the child learn to make change as a "storekeeper." They like being the doc-



Fig. 7 - Some play develops the power of concentration and observation.

tor, the papa, the mama, the teacher - many others! The pleasure from being any of these characters may help the child to decide to follow in their footsteps when they grow up.

FREEDOM TO CREATE

Avoid showing the child "how to" draw or paint, if you expect them to develop creative ability. Instead, help them to notice things for themselves - how the dog pricks up his ears or how some flowers are opening on the magnolia tree today. Encourage them to put on paper their experience of going to the store. Let them do as they wish. Be appreciative of their effort rather than criticize the forms. Better to say, "Tell me about your picture." than, "That doesn't look like a car to me."

COMMUNITY PLAYGROUND

Look for the nearest playground, if there is not space in your yard for safe play. Your children need to use the slide, the jungle gym, the swings. If your community lacks a playground, start one. This would help all children in the community. Find a suitable location - a school yard, for example. Get permission to use it. Get some materials donated from the lumber yards for building equipment. Some of the fathers or older boys might volunteer to build the equipment. The Children's Bureau, Washington, D.C., has printed plans for making playground equipment.



Fig. 8 - Active outdoor play builds coordination of mind and body.

A CHILD'S PLAY TELLS US

Children reveal their inner feelings and conflicts in play. So take time to sit by the window and listen to them playing in the yard. For the same purpose, some nursery schools have one-way vision panels. Parents sit behind a panel and observe children's play without being seen. This is a very valuable experience for parents.

John may cheat at marbles because he feels he has not been treated fairly. Bob, giving orders to other children, may be expressing his resentment of adult domination. Betty may scold her doll in the very tone you used when you scolded her this morning.

Thus, from play parents can learn how children's minds work, what interests them most, what they value most highly and what they have learned from life around them. With more freedom in play than in other routines in the home, children feel free to dramatize their thoughts, to practice the new words they have heard adults use and to act out their likes and dislikes. Play exposes their hopes and fears. It brings out the things that bother or confuse them. Play also reveals their skills and personality development.

WHAT TO OBSERVE

Watch for the way children develop in play. At two years, children will need some guidance. They will be interested in one thing for a short time only. They will play better by themselves. A little later they will play side by side with other children. Each will play alone. They will not want, as a rule, to grab each other's playthings or even hurt each other as they did at two. Somewhere between three and four years of age a child begins to enjoy playing with other children.

Watch to see that children are not too worried over getting dirty, being naughty or breaking things. If they are, perhaps you have set standards that are too high for their stage of development.

Watch to see how children hold their own group when they are old enough for group play. The older children are usually the leaders. Children will likely develop from being dominated ("bossed") to being dominant ("boss") - a natural stage of growth.

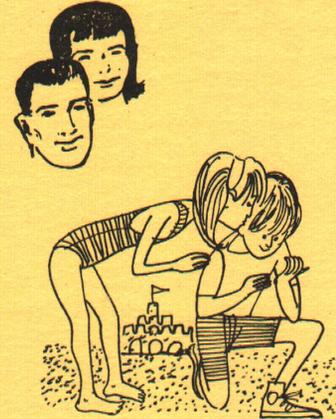


Fig. 9 - Parents need to observe their children as they play.

Watch to see how children use their experiences. Play will be much more imaginative if you provide many opportunities for them to see. Trips to the zoo, to the steam shovel at work or to the circus may leave them speechless. Don't mind. They are too busy taking in everything to have time for talk. Watch them use these experiences in their play.

Listen while you watch. Children's words tell you what is on their minds and what is important to them. You may need to help them straighten out their confusions and overcome their fears. Listening will show you how readily they are learning to use words correctly.