

# It's Child's Play!

We often hear the phrase "child's play" bandied about when something is deemed as easy or unimportant. In reality, true child's play is anything but. There is a rapidly growing body of evidence that indicates that play is central to a child's development and crucial in ensuring that children reach their full potential in life. If you take a look at the animal kingdom, you will be hard pressed to find a member that does not take part in some form of play. For a variety of species, including humans, play is seen as "nearly as important as food and sleep." So what exactly do we mean by "play"? Defining play has been acknowledged as difficult by experts, but often seen as a generic term applied to a wide range of activities chosen by a child. It has been described as "what children and young people do when they are not being told what to do by adults."

In the UK, there has been a shift recently towards a more play-based curriculum in Early Years Education and practitioners are striving to deliver a balance of adult led and child initiated activities. In the competitive world we live in, where the intellectually fittest often achieve success, some parents, however, feel that the time devoted to play is of little value, frivolous, a waste of time... Surely, that time could be put to a better, more constructive use? However, to a child there is nothing more constructive than play. Offering a child a broad spectrum of play based activities at home and school will provide remarkable benefits and opportunities to learn. Indeed, it is deemed such an integral part of the lives of children, that the right to engage in play is included in The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. (Article 31)

So how exactly can play benefit your child? There are many different types of play and each type will enhance their physical,

cognitive, social and emotional skills. In play children can:

- be creative
- be in control
- be on their own
- collaborate with others
- explore how to be safe from dangers in the world
- express themselves
- imagine
- make their own decisions and their own rules
- make their own props
- make sense of their own experiences
- make sense of people, places and things they encounter
- manipulate materials
- move freely using a range of motor skills
- recreate events
- test out new knowledge
- use and explore language freely
- work to the limits of their skills to achieve success

As you can see, play has a huge effect on your child's development. So how can we, as parents and educators, encourage and support our children's play? Firstly, it is important to remember that child initiated play - play that is led or chosen by the child - is the most valuable and effective way of developing a child's social, emotional and thinking skills. Join in now and again with your child's play at home. Switch off your phone and give them some uninterrupted, quality time. Follow your child's lead - this is their special time and they can decide how to use it. Sometimes it is hard, as adults, to let a child play without telling them how to do it. We feel that we have to set rules, but don't expect them to play like us!

Give your child time and let them repeat a game if they want to - even if you don't! Smile graciously when you receive yet another piece of lovingly prepared plastic food, again, and again, and again...



Use your child as a guide, imitate what they are doing and don't try and change it!

In a child's world of play, mums and dads don't always know best! Remember, you're not trying to teach them anything. Your child is already learning whilst you are playing together, without you even noticing.

Play is vital in developing the potential of all children and brings pure and utter joy to a child's life at the same time. Next time, when your child is immersed in their own realm of wonder, exploration and adventure, and you hear the words, "Mummy, Daddy, let's play," take some time out from the daily grind to do just that. Seek out your inner child, and have some fun in their world!

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