

ARTICLE

Make Time to Play Today

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Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity.

~Kay Redfield Jamison

Play is one of the most important ways to develop young children's health, development and learning. Play helps young children thrive by supporting relationships, reducing stress and strengthening core skills [like](#) problem-solving and turn-taking. During play, children use their senses, language, movements, thoughts and feelings, which can have many [benefits](#).

Many of these benefits occur through play because children are exploring, problem solving, working with others and learning how the world works. Play provides a great way for children to experiment and learn. For example, playing with different materials like sand, mud, water and playdough helps children learn the properties of these materials and begin learning about math and science. Playing with adults can also support "[serve and return](#)" interactions, such as a baby smiling at a parent, and the parent smiling back. Peekaboo and patty cake are simple and fun games that help babies learn about patterns in interactions as they eagerly anticipate your reappearance.

Play is also great for building relationships. Through play with others, children learn language and social skills. Pretend play for toddlers is an opportunity to practice roles they have observed. Physical play builds strength, balance and coordination, and as children challenge themselves to climb, balance or kick a ball, they gain confidence and a sense of their own abilities.

Children can play anywhere and anytime. Play can happen during mealtimes, baths or diaper changes. When playing with children it is important for the adults in their lives to support and respect their play. The best games provide emotional safety to learn and explore. What does that mean?

First, respecting children's play involves understanding that play nurtures children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development. Supporting children's play means making time and space for play every day. Finding time to [play outdoors](#) and explore can be very beneficial for young children as they learn about their environments, and for toddlers it helps them develop their gross motor skills, like running and jumping.

Second, respecting the importance of children's play involves "following their lead." Children have very little or no control over how their days unfold. Adults have schedules to keep and children must follow the routine. Play is the only opportunity children have to decide what they are going to do and how they are going to do it (within safe limits).

Sometimes your child might want to play uninterrupted, and sometimes your child might want you to play as well. Observe what they need and want. This may mean putting down your cell phone and really watching for opportunities for you to join in their play. Think of your role as a "stage manager" rather than a "director" of your child's play; help them with props and script, and if you are lucky enough to get a speaking part, go with it!

Third, respecting and supporting play involves acknowledging that play is important to children, and understanding that it's hard for children to stop playing when it's time to do something else. Give them ample time to bring their play to a pause or end by providing a 10-minute and 5-minute warning.

For additional tips for playing with your infants and toddlers, use the resources below.

Let's Play: How Your Child Learns and Grows Through Play from Birth to Three

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2144-let-s-play-how-your-child-learns-and-grows-through-play-from-birth-to-three>



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Tips on Playing with Babies and Toddlers

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1081-tips-on-playing-with-babies-and-toddlers>

A Year of Play (ideas)

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1090-a-year-of-play>

How to be Present and Really Enjoy Kids

<https://afineparent.com/mindful-parenting/how-to-be-present.html>

Importance of Play – 9 Amazing Benefits & Infographic

<https://www.parentingforbrain.com/benefits-play-learning-activities-early-childhood/>

Early Childhood: The Role of Play in Any Setting

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/play-in-early-childhood-the-role-of-play-in-any-setting/>

Building Babies' Brains Through Play: Mini Parenting Master Class

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/building-babies-brains-through-play-mini-parenting-master-class/>

A Parent's Guide to Nature Play

<https://naturalstart.org/feature-stories/parent%E2%80%99s-guide-nature-play>