

# Parenting Together

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## The Importance of Play in Early Childhood

You may think play is all fun and games. Children need to eat, drink and sleep, but what about play? Of course playing keeps children entertained and happy, but are there other reasons play is important? According to early childhood professionals, play is absolutely crucial to healthy child development.

Play enhances brain structure and brain function and helps children learn key skills, like self-regulation, which allow us to focus on learning, remember rules and instructions, and pursue goals.

Children need to develop a variety of skills to optimize their development, to manage stress, and to understand the world around them. Play is one of the ways children do this. Research shows that play with parents and peers helps children practice and develop social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills that build executive function and a prosocial brain. Furthermore, play supports the formation of the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with all caregivers that children need to thrive.



Play offers countless benefits for children (and parents/caregivers). While many people may realize it is important for kids to have opportunities to play, they may not be aware of all the ways play is connected to children's development.

## 5 Benefits of Play for Children

### 1. Essential for brain development

Children learn to think, remember, reason and pay attention through play. They also learn problem solving skills, patience and so much more ... all while playing.

### 2. Reduces obesity

Active toddlers with plenty of opportunities to run, jump and play tend to become more physically confident and in turn more likely to become active and healthy throughout their life.

### 3. Helps to manage stress

Studies have pointed to a relationship between play and reduced stress levels (and fewer problem behaviors). In fact, according to a recent University of Virginia study, young children who display disruptive behavior reduce those behaviors when their teacher spends extra time playing individually with them.

### 4. Helps families bond

Through play, children will have conversations and interactions with parents that help build supportive relationships and encourage emotional connection which also helps children learn to regulate their emotions.

### 5. Enhances communication skills

Through play, children often exchange ideas and verbalize quite a bit. "Play is how children use their vocabulary by interacting with toys and people around them." - Lauren Boeke, Early Literacy Librarian



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# Types and Stages of Play

There are many types and stages of play. From creative to imaginative to socio-dramatic play. Play at any age contributes positively to development.

## Unoccupied Play

Play starts from birth. It may seem like newborns are just sitting there wiggling around, grabbing things and trying to taste everything they possibly can. But they are actually learning a lot about the way their body moves and works. They are also learning about their environment in an effort to understand the world. Their brains are also making important connections.

## Solitary (Independent) Play

Independent play is most common from ages 0-2 when an infant or child plays alone, even if other children are around. This type of play is important because it teaches children how to be

content on their own and keep themselves entertained, which sets them up for self-sufficiency in the future.

## Onlooker Play

This type of play is fairly common in toddlers. It is when a child simply watches what others are doing. They may point, talk, or ask questions without joining others in play. Younger children can learn a lot from simply watching and observing.

## Parallel Play

Parallel play is when children play by each other, side by side, but not with each other. Like onlooker play, it's also common in toddlerhood and sets the stage for associative and cooperative play.

## Associative Play

During associative play, children may be observing others, getting ideas, communicating and at times will do the same thing as one another (such as building similar things with blocks). With this type of play, there are usually no set rules. However, children are beginning to see themselves in a social setting, setting the stage for more complex play involving interactions, problem solving, cooperation and language development.

## Cooperative Play

Cooperative play emerges during the early preschool years and this is when children really start to play together. This stage is especially important as it helps children practice critical social skills. Children may face more social challenges during this stage and may start developing early friendships.

### The Book Nook

*Pete's Pizza*  
by William Steig

*King Jack & the Dragon*  
by Peter Bently

*Not a Box (eng. & span.)*  
by Antoinette Portis

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To read even more about the power of play, check out this article:  
[time.com/4928925/secret-power-play/](https://time.com/4928925/secret-power-play/)

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[orparenting.org](https://orparenting.org)

## References

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