

Practical Tips and Tools

The Truth About Play

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ZERO TO THREE

Play is learning. Playing with your child is not only fun, it's one of the most important ways you can nurture development. "Play" doesn't necessarily mean an organized activity or a dedicated period of "quality time." Play—and learning—can happen anytime you are with your child.

How Do Children Learn Through Play?

Take this short quiz and find out! True or False?

FLASHCARDS, EDUCATIONAL COMPUTER GAMES, AND "BRAIN DEVELOPMENT" VIDEOS ACCELERATE YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING.

False. Babies and toddlers have an in-born desire to learn and develop new skills. They do not need structured classes, flashcards, special videos, or programmed "teaching time" in order to learn. In addition, there has been no research that has found you can make a child "smarter" by using special toys or activities. What children do need is lots of time to explore and play in a variety of ways, indoors and out. And they need you to follow their lead, respect their individual style of play, join in their play, and be their coach in making new discoveries.

PARENTS TEND TO OFFER THEIR CHILD TOYS BASED ON THEIR CHILD'S GENDER.

True. Parents of toddlers react more positively to children who are in gender-traditional play (e.g., girls playing with dolls), and more negatively to children engaged in nontraditional play for their

gender (e.g., boys playing with dolls). This probably reflects dominant cultural beliefs about male and female roles, and shows how early these beliefs and values are communicated to children.

THE AMOUNT OF OUTDOOR PLAY DOES NOT VARY AMONG CHILD CARE SETTINGS.

False. The amount of outdoor play offered to children varies by child care setting with some children receiving little and others much more. Outdoor play is important and helps children develop many physical skills like climbing, jumping, balance, and coordination. Using slides, sandboxes, and other play equipment also promotes social skills like peer play, friendship-building, language, conflict resolution, and negotiation skills. It's important to find out how much outdoor play is available in any child care setting.

YOUNG CHILDREN WHO CANNOT READ AND WRITE DO NOT BENEFIT FROM PLAYING WITH REAL "GROWN-UP" MATERIALS LIKE PAPER, ENVELOPES, WRITING UTENSILS, AND BOOKS.

False. Making literacy materials—like paper, pens, envelopes, and books—available in children's play settings encourages reading and writing.

Playful experimentation with paper and other print materials supports literacy development.

AN 18-MONTH-OLD CAN BE EXPECTED TO SHARE TOYS DURING A PLAY DATE.

False. Sharing is a complex skill. It requires children to be able to manage their own strong emotions, to be empathetic and understand how others feel, and to understand time (i.e., waiting for their turn). Toddlers simply have not developed the skills they need to succeed with sharing. Parents can help children learn this skill by modeling how to share and by playing turn-taking games, such as rolling a ball back and forth. Children begin to develop the skills of sharing at about age 3 years but will still need help as they mature.

So What Can You Do to Make the Most of Your Child's Playtime?

Check out the tips below.

FOLLOW YOUR CHILD'S LEAD.

Provide an object, toy, or activity for your baby or toddler and then see what he does with it. It's okay if it's not the "right" way to use the object...let him show you a "new way."

GO SLOWLY.

It's great to show your child how a toy works, but try to hold off on "doing it for her" every time. You can begin something, such as stacking one block on another, and then encourage her to give it a try. Providing just enough help to keep frustration at bay motivates your child to learn new skills.

READ YOUR CHILD'S SIGNALS.

Your little one may not be able to tell you using words when he's had enough or when he's frustrated. But he has other ways—like using his sounds, facial expressions, and gestures. Reading the signals that precede a tantrum help you know when to jump in or change to a new activity. Reading his signals can also tell you what activities your child prefers.

LOOK AT YOUR PLAY SPACE.

Is the area child-friendly and child-safe? Is there too much noise or other distractions? Is the area safe to explore? Is this a good place for the activity you've chosen, such as running, throwing balls, or painting? Checking out your space beforehand can prevent a tantrum, an accident, or a broken lamp.

PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM.

Although a child's desire to do things over and over again is not necessarily thrilling for moms and dads, it is for their young children. They are practicing in order to master

a challenge. And when a child can do it "All by myself!" she is rewarded with a powerful sense of her own competency—a confidence that she is a smart and successful being. The more children practice and master new skills, the more likely they are to take on new challenges and the learning continues. So when you're tempted to hide that toy that you don't think you can stand playing with yet one more time, remember the essential role repetition plays in your child's development.

Look for Ways to Adapt Play Activities to Meet Your Child's Needs

You may be a parent, relative, or caregiver of a child that has special needs. A physical, mental, or social disability can pose the occasional challenge to play time. Still, all children learn through play and any play activity can be adapted to meet a child's unique needs. The guidelines below can help you think about how to make playtime enjoyable and appropriate to your child's skills, preferences, and abilities:

THINK ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT.

How do variables like sound or light affect your child? What is the background noise like in your play area? Is there a television or radio on? Are there many other kids around? If your child seems distressed during playtime, and you've tried everything else, move to a quieter, less stimulating area to play.

HOW DOES YOUR CHILD RESPOND TO NEW THINGS?

Some infants and toddlers, particularly if they have a special need, are easily overstimulated, while others enjoy a lot of activity. Try starting playtime slowly, with one toy or object, and gradually add others. See what kind of reactions you get. Are there smiles when a stuffed bear is touched and hugged? Does your child seem startled by the loud noises coming from the toy fire engine?

HOW DOES YOUR CHILD REACT TO DIFFERENT TEXTURES, SMELLS, AND TASTES?

For example, some objects may be particularly enjoyable for your little one to touch and hold. Others may "feel funny" to them. Read your child's signals and modify the play experience accordingly.

INVOLVE PEERS.

It is important for a child with special needs, just as it is for a child who is typically developing, to establish relationships with peers. Arrange playdates or look for opportunities for your child to play with other children, such as at the park or during a library story hour. Having fun with peers is an important way that children learn social skills like sharing, conflict resolution, and empathy—and also help prepare children for the school setting later on.



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