

Learning to Play; Playing to Learn

By Diane Trautman

In our zeal to ensure that our children are competitive with their peers, we tend to forget one essential element of learning: play. To help our kids develop into well-rounded adults, we need to better understand their needs at each age level, and provide appropriate materials, opportunities and encouragement for a variety of play activities.

Babies and toddlers learn about themselves and their place in the world through non-competitive play and repetitive activities. Toddlers generally engage in parallel play (alongside others, but not with them) focusing on their own needs. They are developing physical skills, their attention span, and their intellects.

By preschool, children begin to play with other children. They may imitate rules, but they are more intent on building and creating things than on winning. Through play, they develop and refine motor skills and basic academic skills such as counting, reading, and writing.

During elementary school, children improve their physical coordination and social skills through formal games and those they create on their own. They develop an understanding of word meanings, letter meanings, and numbers through games and riddles.

In late childhood and early adolescence, children are ready for structured games with established rules. They become more socially aware and their focus shifts to their peer groups. As they play and develop their roles in organized activities and groups, they learn how they fit into the social structure.

Playing with information allows children to learn concepts and develop skills in a variety of ways, and take ownership of that information. Events and information that have personal relevance create neural connections that embed information and skills into long-term memory.

We can support our children's physical, intellectual and emotional growth by providing age-appropriate toys and activities: puzzles and blocks to help with spatial concepts, manipulative substances like clay to explore changes in form, costumes and equipment for imitative play, musical instruments and art materials for creative expression, and equipment for outdoor play. Brain research has shown that physical activity enhances learning, while promoting physical development and coordination.

When we respect the value of play and encourage it in balance with work, we provide fertile ground for education.

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