



The Power of Play

Play enhances every part of child development, from social skills to math and literacy. Play is powerful! And while play for an adult may be the opposite of work, for children play is their work. Parents provide an extremely important role by simply understanding the nature of play and the pleasure it provides. Traveling through the ages and stages of childhood play is easier when you have an idea of what children need and have fun with at different points in their development.

Infants

Infants are learning to trust that the world is a safe place. Early on, they are fascinated with faces and voices, and soon learn to smile and babble. Long before they can move around, infants love stimulating things to look at, touch, hear, and mouth such as rattles and teething rings. They soon learn to predict what will happen next. When they see mom or dad wind up the over-the-crib mobile, they wiggle with excitement because they know it will move or make music. They delight in swinging a rattle around because they know it will create a rhythmic sound. Also, once they develop grasping skills, they enjoy picking things up and filling and emptying containers.

Toddlers

After these little ones become mobile, it's time for parents to put on

their running shoes to keep up. Toddlers are busy exploring. They imitate everything from talking on the phone to clogging around in mom's or dad's shoes. They like to push and pull, build and knock down. Coordination improves, allowing them to string large beads and balance on riding toys. A favorite is playing with sand and water. They are very tactile and explore the world through their five senses. Saying "Don't touch!" rolls easily off a parent's tongue, but not touching is very difficult for a toddler. That's one more reason parents must stay vigilant. Toddlers want to touch and taste their way through the day. Fine motor skills develop rapidly, allowing the toddler to scribble and finger paint.

Preschoolers

Pretend play is at its height with preschoolers. They are learning to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and are often found trying on roles—from mommy and daddy to princess and firefighter. Play themes such as house, hospital, school, farm, office, and store provide hours of entertainment, as do dolls and action figures. This age group also enjoys sand and water, but they conduct experiments: Does the leaf sink or float? They build roads, tunnels, and castles. They also build structures with blocks and can follow simple instructions and patterns for small connecting blocks. Preschool-



ers love music and learn the words to many songs. They begin to draw objects and create more complex paintings. Their large muscles are developing rapidly as they climb and ride scooters and bikes. Outdoor games are perfect outlets for their boundless energy.

Five to Eight Years

Children in this age group are rapidly building independence, and friends are very important. Their skills in cooperating with others and understanding the concept of fairness contribute to their participation in organized sports. The word fair comes up often in their conversation as they play games with more complex rules. They need support and limits in balancing their time indoors with outside play, and they have an increased ability to understand the natural world. The school-age child can work on projects that require more time, such as building a birdhouse or creating jewelry. The benefits of music are clear, as many children participate in formal music lessons.

PERSONAL PARENTING

SAFETY

Children can be taught some of the signs of safety early in life. When you're driving or walking, point out things such as traffic lights, stop signs, and crosswalks.

You can also teach children how to place an emergency call to 911 or the emergency number in your area. Even before children know how to read, they can be taught how to press a preset coded button.



WEATHER WATCHING

- ✓ March is a great time to note changes in the weather.
- ✓ It's a great time to look at the night sky, take nature walks, and learn about how animals react to weather.

HEAVENLY HUMMUS

- 1 can (15 ounces) garbanzo beans, drained, liquid reserved
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 tsp. ground cumin
- ½ tsp. salt
- 1 Tbsp. olive oil

Combine all of the ingredients except the reserved liquid in a blender. Add small amounts of the reserved liquid until the desired consistency is reached.

* Enjoy this healthy snack with pita bread or crackers.

REPETITION IS CRUCIAL

When brain neurons connect through repetition and experience, they form a physical structure called a synapse.

A synapse can only become permanent by being strengthened through repetition. It all makes sense when children want us to read the same book over and over, or when they recite a favorite nursery rhyme or sing a beloved song.



Music, Music, Music

Even very young children are drawn to music, but it's much more than entertainment. Research has linked exposure to music to increased language, math, listening, and memory skills.

Ah, Music! by Alike is one book children will want you to repeat. It's filled with facts about the history of music.

You and your child can learn about pitch and tone and how music brings out feelings. This book by a beloved author will be music to your ears.

Bullying Is Serious: Parents Can Help Prevent It

Adults, parents, teachers, families, and friends all have a role to play in preventing bullying. This damaging antisocial behavior makes the headlines almost every night. Even young children are susceptible. Children must learn to identify bullying behavior, learn techniques for stopping it, and communicate with an adult when it happens. The great news is that loving, responsible parents can identify the behavior before it becomes a problem.



Keep the lines of communication open. Check in with kids often. Listen to them. Know their friends, ask about school, and understand their concerns.

A few facts

Bullies harass and intimidate systematically and repeatedly. They may be boys or girls. They may operate in groups, but more commonly act alone. Research shows that the long-term effect on children who bully or are bullied is damaging.

Stop it early

Stopbullying.gov is a website packed with helpful information. Here are some tips from the site:

- Help kids understand bullying. Talk about what bullying is and how to stand up to it safely. Tell kids that bullying is unacceptable. Make sure they know how to get help.
- Encourage kids to do what they love. Special activities, interests, and hobbies can boost confidence, help kids make friends, and protect them from bullying behavior.
- Model how to treat others with kindness and respect.

Raise Tolerant Children

- Model nurturing, tolerant behavior.
- Teach conflict resolution skills such as talking things out and brainstorming solutions together.
- Be a hands-on parent. Always know your child's playmates and where they play.
- Intervene if bullying behavior occurs.
- Monitor the cartoons, computer games, and videos your child views.
- Set clear, consistent rules for behavior. Give attention to behaviors that are gentle and nonaggressive.
- Create a family environment that is tolerant of ALL people regardless of their race, gender, religious affiliation, or disabilities.

Help Your Child Stand Up to Bullies

- Be vigilant. Victims are sometimes reluctant to tell an adult of their predicament.
- Don't ignore it or think kids can work it out themselves. Ask specific questions that will shed light on the nature of the conflict.
- Develop strategies to discourage bullies. Words spoken loudly and forcefully such as "Stop!" often detour bullies. Give your child an opportunity to practice assertive phrases and behavior. Humor may also put an end to the bullying.
- Talk about what to do if these tactics, including walking away, don't work. When children feel confident in their abilities to deal with difficult schoolmates, they are less likely to be a target.
- Work on friendship-building skills, and give your child lots of opportunities to develop relationships that are fun, satisfying, and reciprocal.
- Be part of the solution by helping to create anti-bullying policies in your child's school, extracurricular activities, or other outside classes.