

It's a Kid's Job Playing Helps Kids Learn and Grow

What would childhood be without time to play? Play, it turns out, is essential to growing up healthy. Research shows that active, creative play benefits just about every aspect of child development.

“Play is behavior that looks as if it has no purpose,” says NIH psychologist Dr. Stephen Suomi. “It looks like fun, but it actually prepares [kids] for a complex social world.” Evidence suggests that play can help boost brain function, increase fitness, improve coordination, and teach cooperation.

Play can help lay a foundation for learning the skills we need for social interactions. If human youngsters lack playtime, says Dr. Roberta Golinkoff, an infant language expert at the University of Delaware, “social skills will likely suffer. You will lack the ability to inhibit impulses, to switch tasks easily, and to play on your own.” Play helps young children master their emotions and make their own decisions. It also teaches flexibility, motivation, and confidence.

Kids don't need expensive toys to get a lot out of playtime. “Parents are children's most enriching plaything,” says Golinkoff. Playing and talking to babies and children are vital for their language development. Golinkoff says that kids who talk with their parents tend to acquire a vocabulary that will later help them in school. Let kids guide the conversation. When you take over the conversation, you may shut it down.

Unstructured, creative, physical play also lets children burn calories and develop all kinds of strengths, such as learning how the world works. In free play, children choose the games, make the rules, learn to negotiate, and release stress. Free play often involves fantasy. If children, say, want to learn about being a fireman, they can imagine and act out what a fireman does. And if something scary happens, free play can help defuse emotions by working them out.

“Sports are a kind of play,” Golinkoff says, “but it's not the kids calling the shots.” It's important to engage in a variety of activities, including physical play, social play, and solitary play. “The key is that in free play, kids are making the decisions,” says Golinkoff. You can't learn to make decisions if you're always told what to do.

Some experts fear that free play is becoming endangered. In the last two decades, children have lost an average of eight hours of free play per week. As media screens draw kids indoors, hours of sitting raise the risk for obesity and related diseases. When it comes to video games and other media, parents should monitor content, especially violent content, and limit the amount of time children sit.

For more information and to read the whole article please go to <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/special-issues/parenting/its-kids-job>