

Importance of Play

Research has determined that “free play”, that is, providing children with unstructured opportunities to play, is critical for building cognitive skills such as problem solving, coping with stress and becoming socially adept. The January, 2009 journal *Scientific American* included an article entitled “The Serious Need for Play”. The article stated that free, imaginative play is crucial for normal cognitive, social and emotional development. In other words, play makes us smarter, better adjusted and less stressed.

However, in the last few decades, free play has been losing ground in children’s busy timetables that are filled with lessons, sports and other organized and structured activities. Recent research has noted that children’s free play time dropped by 25% between 1981 and 1997. Researchers are theorizing that this lack of free play, with no time to foster creativity and cooperation skills, can disrupt development and increase anxiety, unhappiness and social maladjustment.

The toys that are available for children now tend to be technology-based and can erode creativity. Few toys are marketed for creative play, where children are more apt to generate their own ideas.

When adults play with children, it is important to let the child take the lead. Take time to slow down and let the child’s interests and curiosity develop. Answer questions with questions. If a child asks “what is this for?” answer “what do you think it is for?” Or, ask the child to make a guess based on their prior knowledge and experiences.

Here are some ideas for free play activities – any given type of free play could fall into more than one category – but the point is that these types of free play activities develop cognitive, social and emotional skills and need to be an important part of any child’s day.

- **Quiet Play:** picture books, bead-stringing, puzzles, doll centres, crayons
- **Creative Play:** painting, drawing, music, dancing, play dough, sand, water, collage, make believe, dress up
- **Active Play:** outdoors – balls, slides, swings, riding toys, climbing tress, running around; indoors – sand and water, crates, blocks, rhythm band, bean bag toss

- **Cooperative Play:** play requiring more than one person – ball games, tag, see-saws, doll centre, house centre, block building, hide and seek, tag
- **Dramatic Play:** role playing different life roles, occupations, activities; e.g., mother, father, fire-a6CrCDr