

Why Kids Need to Play

By Heather Gilmore, LLMSW

It is so important for kids to have unstructured, free play time. In these days of schedules, routines, and many demands and responsibilities, it is increasingly important for children to be allowed to just play.

See the following reasons why children need to play (statements in italics retrieved from [More Than a Toy](#)).

1. *According to a clinical report by the American Academy of Pediatrics, “Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children.”* Play is necessary in order to help children develop social skills, because they learn to get along with others, take turns, and much more. Play helps children gain healthy emotional development because it allows them to express their conscious and unconscious experiences regarding their feelings about their life and things that are going on around them.

2. *Play is important to a child’s neurological development.* By playing, children are promoting healthy brain development because they are strengthening many neuronal connections that would otherwise disappear or weaken if not used.

3. *United Nations High Commission for Human Rights recognized play as a right of every child because of its importance to optimal child development.*

4. *Public schools throughout the United States continue to reduce the amount of time allotted to free play. For example, in response to No Child Left Behind, many schools increased their focus on reading and math by decreasing the amount of time allocated to recess and the creative arts. Ironically, play helps children adjust to school and improves their readiness to learn.* When children are allowed to play without being told what they specifically have to do, they become more focused, have greater attention spans, and improve their academic skills.

5. *Overscheduled family lifestyles often lead to less time for quality parent-child interaction and child-driven play. Many families would benefit from less hurried routines that allow for unstructured play.* Family life and child behavior problems can improve when more child-led playtime is allowed on a frequent basis. When parents play with their children in a way that allows the child to decide what they are going to do and with the parent simply being with the child and interacting with them at the child’s level, parent-child relationships and family life can improve.

6. *Children learn how to share, resolve conflicts, make decisions, be assertive, and work in groups through unstructured play.* Although some children are more apt to have these skills than others, most children are able to develop these great social skills through playing with other children. Even playing alone can help a child gain self-confidence, assertiveness, decision-making skills, and much more.

7. *Play allows children to identify, express, and learn about feelings.* Children often use pretend play to act out things they see in their lives, such as what their mom and dad are like, experiences that occur at school, or what friendships are like. Amidst these everyday life experiences, children of course have feelings about the events. Children become more aware of their own and others’ feelings and how to manage feelings by expressing them and working through emotions in play.

8. *Children can make sense of their life experiences through unstructured play.* Children don’t see things the same way as adults do, so they can use play to have a better understanding of certain life experiences.

9. *Parents can help children who are experiencing a wide range of difficulties by learning how to play with them in a specific way using selected toys. These difficulties include, but are not limited to,*

emotional problems, pervasive developmental disorders, speech problems, mental retardation, parental divorce, at-risk circumstances, relocation, immigration, abuse/neglect, mental health diagnoses, foster/adoption issues, chronic illness, social difficulties, hyperactivity, disabilities, learning difficulties, exposure to violence, adjustment difficulties, and deaf and hard of hearing. There are ways that a parent can help their children with these types of issues by using specific types of toys and specific types of interactions. However, there are also therapeutic interventions that a therapist or play therapist can teach a parent to best suit the child's situation, such as filial therapy, parent-child interaction therapy, and play therapy interventions.

10. *Parents can significantly improve their relationships with their children by learning how to play with them in a specific way using selected toys.* When parents simply be with their child and truly focus on their child (without being in a hurry or trying to over-manage the play), their relationship with their child can greatly improve. Play time doesn't have to occur for hours a day. It can be as little as a few minutes here and there but doing this type of play on a daily or at least almost daily basis is very helpful to a parent-child relationship.

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