

The “Brainy” Benefits of Play

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Think back to one of your favorite activities as a kid — maybe it was playing outside, creating something, or playing with your favorite toys. We used to be pros at playing! I’m sure you probably went to bed thinking about your favorite toy or activity and woke up excited and eager to play again. You may even remember specific details from the environment around you as you recall your favorite play time. This is because your brain was learning!

Playing engages many areas of your brain through exploring, inventing, creating, control, and just plain having fun. Learning is the process of acquiring knowledge through different experiences, observations, or from someone teaching you. These interactions create an integrated brain, able to use basic skills to complete complex tasks. It can trigger long term memory, which would be the reason you can recall your favorite toy with such vivid recollection. Who knew that play could be so complicated and so important in children’s development.

Play is a fundamental need of all children. It helps children obtain skills needed later in life. It can be divided into three different groups; object play, locomotor play, and social play (Aamodt & Wang, 2011). Let’s take a little closer look at all three of these areas and how they are critical in development and help the brain learn survival skills.

OBJECT PLAY

Object play provides children with the opportunity to explore. Children will play with their toys and learn about the different characteristics. They will play with the toys and learn how to manipulate or use the toys in many different ways. Children are often seen repeating their actions and talking to themselves about what they are doing and playing with (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). This play requires new objects to increase in the engagement process and decrease in behavior issues.

There are a few things to consider during object play. Make sure the toys are age appropriate, safe, and that the child isn’t getting frustrated. However, you should also be aware that the child needs space to make the discoveries on their own. As much as we love to help a struggling child with a toy, we need to give him space and time to let him problem solve all by himself.

LOCOMOTOR PLAY

This kind of play is especially important. This is one of those areas that sometimes gets over looked and is as important as any other skill. Movement is an integrated complex series of multiple systems and is not automatic, rather it is learned. How could a child learn all of these different things? They need to play! They should be encouraged to run, throw, crawl, climb, swing, and so much more! Locomotor play is critical in learning about body positioning in space, personal space, and coordination. It’s easy to identify children who may need more locomotor play and other children who thrive on the movement.

Think back to either yourself or someone you have seen running, skipping, dancing, crawling, or even trying to walk in high heel shoes. Those things are all components of locomotor skills. Children who need more locomotor play may struggle to complete tasks such as running, hopping, skipping, rolling, and sliding when developmentally they should be able to do.

SOCIAL PLAY

Social play is the interaction between children. It can be seen in chasing, wrestling, and pretending. This act of working with others is so important in the development of children. A child can pretend to take their friends on trips around the world, manage a bakery, run a store, teach other kids, and so many other unbelievably important experiences. This gives the children the authority to be in charge. They have to negotiate, problem solve, and learn to interact with others in positive ways.

It is important to know that this social play does not need adult organization. Many of us try to help our children by creating organized play groups and signing them up for sports, but the reality is that children just need to play and navigate these social interactions on their own. They need to be able to engage their creativity to develop an emotional connection with their play mates as well as manage the social interactions.

Children need to play to learn. As much as we focus on being school ready, play is often devalued, when in reality it is the foundation of all learning. Here are some suggestions that I have found to be important for quality play:

1. Let children create their own toys and games.
2. Allow and promote movement daily.
3. Read, act out, and create stories together with your children.
4. Discourage excess TV and video games.
5. Allow children time to explore and problem solve.
6. Have fun, laugh, and if your child wants to play with you...PLAY!

Ashley Montague says it best, “In the early years, play is almost synonymous with life. It is second only to being nourished, protected, and loved. It is a basic ingredient of physical, intellectual, social and emotional growth” (Rose, 2011).

References:

Aamodt, S. & Wang, S., (2011). *Welcome to your child's brain: How the mind grows from conception to college*. New York, Bloomsbury. Dodge, D., Colker, L., and Heroman, C. (2002). *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*. (4th ed.). Washinton D.C., Teaching Strategies. Rose, M. (2013). *Play-America's angel raising the bar on raising america*. Retrieved from www.americasangel.org/research/play.