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More than Fun and Games: Why Play Matters

By Leah Merrill

It's the third time this morning that Oliver has saved the world and his sweet mother hasn't even brushed her teeth yet. First, he was sword fighting against Captain Hook and his evil crew, then he was brawling with aliens from Mars, and now he's saving a baby hippo from drowning in volcanic lava: "Hang on, buddy, I'm coming!"

Watching children play is endearing. They possess the gift of imagination that we as adults grew out of long ago. But play isn't just adorable to watch, it also happens to be fundamental to a child's development. Play is important because it helps children develop socially and emotionally, physically, and cognitively. Whether you feel like you don't have enough time, the proper resources, or adequate energy to engage in playtime with your child, don't worry—you've come to the right place. This article will give concrete play suggestions so you—whether you're a parent, teacher, or friend—have specific playtime ideas to reference next time you're hanging with a kiddo.

Social & Emotional Development

We've all seen kids wrestle out on the playground or in the winter snow. We may find ourselves rolling our eyes and shaking our heads as we pray one of them doesn't end up injured. But have you ever considered that this type of play actually encourages emotional and social development? Researchers have found that rough-and-tumble play (such as wrestling and tackling) is linked to children's emotional expressiveness and emotion regulation.¹ Put simply, this means that kids who engage in this specific type of play tend to more effectively communicate their emotions through body language and stay calm when feeling frustrated.^{2,3}

Another type of play, called sociodramatic play (when children dress up, act out stories, or play with princess-themed toys) has proven to be vital in a child's emotional development.



Kids who participate in sociodramatic play feel more positive emotions toward their peers, have a higher level of emotional understanding, and are better at regulating their emotions.¹

As a general rule of thumb, the adult's role during playtime is to provide enough space and needed materials while the child's role is to direct the play itself. Be sure not to hijack the child's play—this is one of the few opportunities that children get to be “in charge” and it is important that the play be child-directed.

Here are a few play ideas to help develop your child's emotional and social skills:^{4,5}

- Clear the furniture, grab some pillows, and engage in a good old-fashioned pillow fight.
- Gather stuffed animals, brushes, combs, and towels. Then let the kids take it from there and may their imaginations run wild!
- With a cardboard box, some markers, scissors, and cardstock paper, let your kids work their creative magic and transform an old box into something much more exciting.



Physical Development

We now understand that play helps a child become a more empathetic, socially competent person. But what else does play have to offer?

Play helps with children's physical development as well.⁶ Physical activity during childhood builds muscle mass and endurance, improves blood pressure, helps maintain healthy blood sugar levels, strengthens bones, and regulates body weight while reducing body fat.⁷

Also, regular exercise in childhood is linked with staying physically active as an adult while simultaneously reducing the risk of several chronic diseases including type 2 diabetes and obesity.^{7,8} Why not kickstart your child's physical health and get 'em moving today? (Plus, it'll help tire them out so they sleep longer through the night, which no parent will ever complain about.)

Here are a few play ideas to improve your child's physical well-being:

- Go on a bike ride together around your neighborhood.
- Gather some old sports equipment and let your kids create a relay race in your backyard.
- Go swimming at your local recreation center.

Cognitive Development

What if I told you that play is linked to yet another benefit: cognitive development?⁹ Well hold onto your hat (or perhaps your Play-Doh) that's exactly what I'm telling you! As a child's cognitive skills improve, they learn to process information more quickly and skillfully and make connections to other information.¹⁰ Playtime provides a space for your child to create, experiment, think, reason, and learn all at once.¹¹

Playing with blocks specifically has been found to improve children's problem-solving abilities.¹² They learn through trial and error that tall and skinny block towers are susceptible to falling while towers built with a sturdy base will remain standing. Without even realizing it, children are developing crucial problem-solving skills.

Playing with blocks also improves children's fine motor skills, a crucial aspect of development. Fine motor skills lay the foundation to mastering future everyday tasks such as buttoning a shirt, tying one's shoes, writing with a pencil, eating with utensils, typing on a keyboard, etc.¹³ Playing with Duplo blocks doesn't seem like such a waste of time after all, does it?

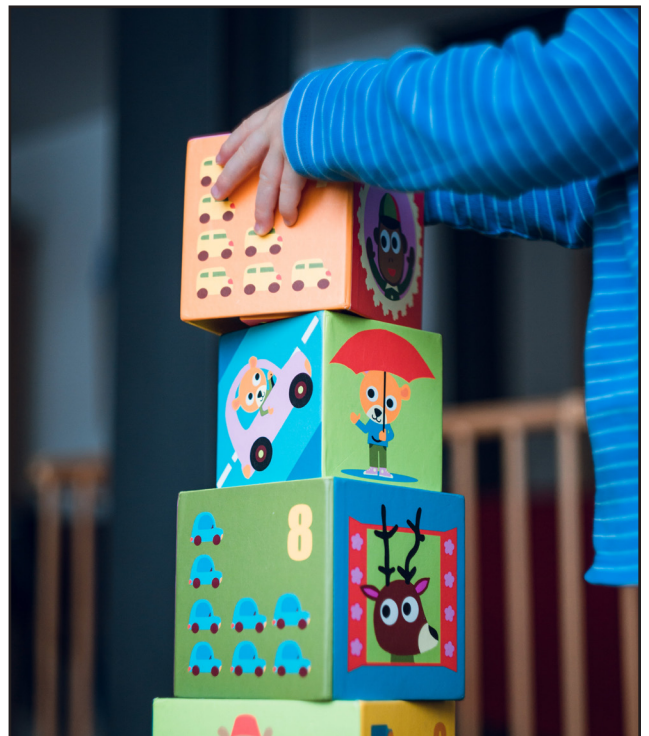
Here are a few play ideas to improve your child's cognitive development:¹¹

- Do a simple jigsaw puzzle—but make sure you let the child take the lead.
- Build towers with toy blocks. Who can build the tallest tower?
- Play a simple board game like "Chutes and Ladders."

Takeaways About Play

In summary, play is vital for children's development for a variety of reasons: it helps children develop emotional and social skills while simultaneously promoting physical and cognitive development.

So, the next time a child asks you to dress up as the Evil Stepmother, play tag, or build a Lego tower, remember how much of a difference you can make in their life. And if your mind ever draws a blank when playtime approaches, feel free to reference the play ideas listed at the end of each section above. Lastly, please bear in mind that it is more than "just play," it is helping your child develop into a well-rounded, successful human being.



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