

# Importance of Play

The sights and sounds of children at play is one of life's simple pleasures. The laughter . . . the chatter . . . the running, jumping, and skipping touches something deep within the soul, bringing to consciousness the memories of the child we once were. Sadly, such sights and sounds are becoming increasingly rare as play is disappearing from the landscape of our nation's communities, playgrounds, schools, and child care centers. Play is being replaced by "real learning," organized sports, computer games, and technology. However, experts in child development, neuroscience, medicine, and early childhood education are sounding the alarm at this disturbing trend as the body of evidence continues to grow supporting the importance of play and its contribution to healthy growth and development. The experts agree—play is not an option, it is a necessity. It is a sign of health in young children.

## Definition of Play

Defining play is analogous to pinning down the wind but most experts agree that free play has distinct characteristics. **First of all, it is initiated by children, not imposed or required by adults.** It often happens spontaneously and there is a sense of unfettered freedom in the content and direction of the play. Second, play is intrinsically motivating. The sheer pleasure of the experience causes children to persist and engage in the activity over and over again. Third, the process is more important than the product. This means the attention of the child is focused on the experience itself, not on the end result. Fourth, play is guided by intrinsic rules that are understood and negotiated by children. At first glance, spontaneous, child-initiated play may seem free of constraints, but if one watches closely, there are unspoken rules clearly understood by the children involved. For example, when playing "house" each child is assigned a role and the unspoken expectation is that he or she will remain true to the behavior and actions of this particular person throughout the duration of the play experience. If Johnny has been assigned the role of "dog" and suddenly begins acting like the mailman, he has broken the unspoken rules. What is likely to happen? The play typically will come to a halt in order to scold Johnny for breaking the rules. He will either have to return to his assigned role, skillfully negotiate a new role to play, or be excluded from the experience.



**Barbara Sorrels**  
Contributor



Dr. Barbara Sorrels is Executive Director of The Institute for Childhood Education. She has 20 years of classroom experience teaching children of all ages, and 5 years of experience teaching graduate and undergraduate students at the university level. She founded early childhood centers located in Washington, D.C. and Fort Worth, Texas.

***“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation.”***

***—Plato***

## Why is play important in the lives of young children?

Quite simply, we are born to play. Researchers across the animal kingdom have noted the pervasiveness of play among mammals—humans included. During periods of rapid brain growth and development, play becomes more prevalent. In fact, researchers have concluded that play seems to be the primary architect of the developing brain and is one of the vital signs of health. Think about it—what is the first indication that a child is ill? Typically, the child stops playing.



Dr. Stuart Brown, physician, psychiatrist, and play researcher has provided compelling evidence for the necessity of play. Dr. Brown was commissioned by Governor John Connolly of Texas to investigate the behavioral patterns of mass murderer Charles Whitman, who shot 44 people on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin in 1966. Dr. Brown found that Whitman suffered violence and abuse from the hand of his father and was allowed no time to play at home. It was also reported Whitman did not engage in play

at school (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005; Brown, 2009; Wenner, 2009). These findings led Dr. Brown to continue his investigation into the play history of 26 convicted murderers in Texas. He found that 90% of them either did not play at all as children or demonstrated abnormal play patterns such as bullying, cruelty to animals, or other anti-social acts (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005; Brown, 2009; Wenner, 2009). Continuing his research, Dr. Brown collected the play histories of over 6,000 people from all walks of life, demonstrating the long-term consequences of the absence of play. Those who were deprived of play experienced increased depression, loss of productivity, decreased creativity, and over-all less satisfaction and joy with life (Brown, 2009).

## Play and Healthy Development

**Emotional Development.** Adults who work with children are well aware of the emotional roller coaster every child rides on a daily basis. Children move from joy to anger, contentment to frustration, and discouragement to pride, often in a matter of seconds. In the context of play, children learn to regulate and control strong emotions. Play also provides a sense of emotional security where children are able to create a world they can master and conquer their own fears. Open-ended play reduces stress and restores a sense of optimism. Play has long been an essential tool for child psychologists and psychiatrists in helping severely depressed and troubled children. Play fosters growth of self awareness as children discover their interests and come face to face with their own strengths and weaknesses.

**Social Development.** Play helps children learn to be friends. Learning to share, taking turns, showing empathy, and cooperating with others are essential life skills. Leadership abilities are honed and children come to an understanding of what it means to play “fair.” They learn to look at things through the perspective of others and learn the importance of rules in helping people get along.

**Cognitive Development.** Experts agree that the evidence indicates play actually helps children become smarter (Brown, 2009). Open-ended play develops creativity, imagination, flexible thinking and problem-solving skills. When children play, they inevitably encounter dilemmas and surprising events that call upon their abilities to adapt and find new solutions. Play is also a language-rich experience that develops vocabulary and complex language skills.

**Physical Development.** Fine motor skills are refined as children engage in activities such as building with Legos®, drawing with sidewalk chalk, and buttoning dress-up clothes. Manipulating small parts and pieces develops small muscles in the hands as well as eye-hand coordination. Large muscles, or “gross motor” skills, are strengthened and developed when children ride bikes, play hop scotch, and jump rope. Intense, sustained physical activity helps protect children from childhood obesity and certain types of diabetes.



**“One of the most obvious facts about grownups to a child is that they have forgotten what it is like to be a child.”**

**—Randall Jarrell**





## The Controversy Between Play and Academics

The current trend toward academics and standardized testing of young children has led to the disappearance of play in many early childhood settings. Child care centers, Pre-K, and Head Start classrooms are becoming pressure cookers of stress and performance standards, and teacher-driven learning environments centered around “skill and drill.” What is driving this trend toward academics? Many experts believe it is fueled by a lack of understanding of child development and how children learn. There is also a great deal of confusion regarding the content and focus of the early childhood learning environment.

**Narrow view of content.** Standardized testing has led to an emphasis on that which can be measured and quantified, narrowing the content of early childhood curriculum to letters, numbers, colors, sounds, and shapes. Such an approach ignores the natural curiosity and inquisitiveness of the child and trivializes his drive to understand and make sense of this new and exciting world in which he lives. Discovery, exploration, and experimentation is seen as trivial and superfluous to “real learning.”

**Fear of play.** At the heart of the focus on academics is an inherent fear of play—fear that children will not get what they need if adult control is relinquished and children are allowed to follow their own pursuits and interests. This misguided thinking stems from a superficial understanding of play and a failure to look deeply at the process. Play is seen as a trivial and “childish” activity. It fails to recognize that the child’s innate drive to play is an indication of its importance to healthy development and it is a failure to trust the developmental process.

**Inappropriate focus on “getting children ready.”** As children progress upward on the educational ladder, the consequences related to high stakes testing and achievement become increasingly serious. School funding, teacher pay, and community support are often based on test scores. Teachers and care givers are under increased pressure to get children “ready” for the expectations of the next year, leading to “pushed down” curriculum. This misguided orientation to the future fails to give children what they need in the present. If teachers meet the emotional, physical, social, and cognitive needs of the child in the present moment, he will inherently be “ready” for the next step, provided the expectations at each age are developmentally supportive and appropriate.



**Lack of understanding of how children learn.** Young children are sensory learners. They look, listen, taste, smell, and feel their way into understanding the world and how it works. They learn by doing—not listening to explanations by adults, not by looking at flash cards or sitting in front of a TV or computer screen. They learn by asking questions...by trial and error...by testing their theories and learning from their mistakes. Asking children to sit quietly and respond to flash cards, fill out workbook pages, and “bubble in” the right answer squelches curiosity and drive to learn and make sense of the world. Playful learning environments engage all of the senses and are the child’s laboratory of learning.

### **What is Playful Learning?**

Effective learning environments for children do not ignore skills and they are not the singular focus of the learning experience. Skills are taught through “playful learning” in a context that is meaningful to children. For example, in a skills-driven classroom children may be given a coloring sheet and the adult “teaches” children color words by telling them what color to use for each object on the page. In a “playful learning” environment, adults draw children’s attention to color and introduce color word vocabulary as children paint at the easel, make patterns with pattern blocks, and put puzzles together. In a skills-driven classroom, children may be asked to draw a line between pictures of rhyming words on a worksheet. In a “playful learning” classroom, rhyming words are learned through finger plays, rhyming stories, songs, and riddles.

A playful learning environment embraces a much larger view of the nature and content of learning than simply skills. There is an intentional focus on dispositions toward learning and the development of thinking, creativity, and imagination. Dispositions toward learning are simply habits of mind or the tendency to respond to a particular situation in a consistent manner. Curiosity, persistence, and self direction are important dispositions nurtured through play. Playful learning environments provide novel and intriguing materials that capture children’s curiosity to a level that motivates them to persevere and attend to the task at hand for sustained periods of time. Adults intentionally create dilemmas or “discrepant events” that encourage the child to “puzzle through” situations and playfully find new solutions. They are encouraged to imagine, create, and invent as they revise their understanding.

