

“PLAY is NOT frivolous: *it enhances brain structure and function...*”

—The American Academy of Pediatrics

POWER of PLAY

YOUR GO-TO GUIDE
for NURTURING
healthy
IMAGINATIONS



Melissa & Doug

American Academy
of Pediatrics



DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®

67,000 Pediatricians. Millions of Families. A REVOLUTION *in* PLAY!

Open-ended play is essential for children's healthy growth and development. That's why we are so excited to be partnering with the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), an organization of 67,000 pediatricians, to champion the health benefits of open-ended, creative, brain-building play.

Play is critical for young children's brain development, language acquisition, problem-solving skills, social interactions, and physical well-being. It's so important, pediatricians are even writing prescriptions for it! When children and parents play together, it can help reduce stress and create connections.

PLAY IS

A STATE OF BEING

Play involves living in the moment, losing track of time, feeling connected and experiencing joy, laughter, and even a sense of calm while working through ideas.

MULTI-FACETED

Kids at play learn by observing others, testing new ideas, helping at home, listening, and engaging in daily conversation.

A WINDOW TO A CHILD'S MIND

During open-ended play, children reveal their emotions, their learning style, and their personalities.

FULL OF BENEFITS

Play builds open-minded and empathic thinking, prompting children to approach the world with more curiosity and flexibility.

PLAY
IS NOT!

- ✗ A to-do list chore
- ✗ A competition
- ✗ A performance test
- ✗ Skill-and-drill exercises

3 PRINCIPLES of healthy PLAY

1

PRIORITIZE HANDS-ON PLAY

Play is essential when it comes to your child's health and development. Look for toys that inspire imaginative, open-ended thinking, and can be used in different ways to grow with your child.

2

ENJOY SCREEN-FREE TIME

Limit screen time to no more than 1 hour per day of high-quality programming for children ages 2-5. For children younger than 2, media use should be very limited. It's best when an adult is standing by to co-view, talk, and teach.


3

INTERACT & CONNECT THROUGH PLAY

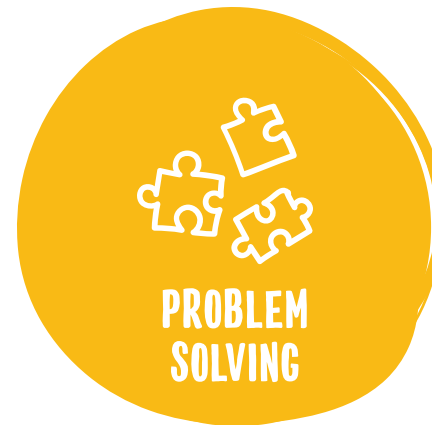
Your child learns best from you! Use play as an opportunity to talk, read, and sing with your children, all of which will build their vocabularies, reduce stress, create connection, and develop foundational skills for learning.

Learn more: MelissaAndDoug.com/PowerOfPlay

“

High-quality toys in each of these categories 
can facilitate caregiver-child interactions, peer play, and the growth of imagination.

—The American Academy of Pediatrics





Pretend Play

“Pretending through toy characters (e.g., dolls, animals, and figures) and associated toy objects (e.g., food, utensils, cars, planes, and buildings) can promote the use of words and narratives to imitate, describe, and cope with actual circumstances and feelings.”

— ACTIVITY CENTERS —

Pretend play promotes language and social-emotional development!



— DOLLS —

Imaginative play nurtures empathy and kindness!



— PLAY FOOD —

Hands-on play develops cognitive skills for abstract thought!



PRETEND
PLAY



DEVELOPMENTAL
PLAY



PROBLEM
SOLVING



CREATIVITY



LANGUAGE
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PHYSICAL
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“Imaginative play ultimately facilitates language development, self-regulation, symbolic thinking, and social-emotional development.”
—The American Academy of Pediatrics

— ROLE PLAY SETS —
 Character play builds flexible thinking!



— PUPPETS —
 Puppet play sharpens storytelling skills!



— CARS, TRUCKS & TRAINS —
 Vehicle play hones fine and gross motor development!





Imitating grown-ups and chipping in at home builds a sense of independence and responsibility. Involve kids as you clean, prepare meals, and shop!

— PLAY PROMPTERS —

Experts say the best kind of play encourages rich interactions between caregiver and child. Here are some ideas you can use to spark kids' pretend play:

Food & Kitchen Play

- **RESTAURANT LAUNCH:** Challenge kids to come up with a restaurant name, menu, and pricing.
- ▲ **SHOPPING TRIP:** Suggest making a list and going on a pretend shopping trip to stock a kitchen. (List-making and following a plan are great for executive functioning skills!)

Dolls & Stuffed Animals

- ★ **TIME FOR TLC:** Baby is crying and needs some TLC! Encourage kids to think about what the baby needs but can't communicate. Then try different comforting techniques such as rocking, singing, or feeding.
- **DOCTOR VISIT:** Suggest a scenario where a doll or stuffed animal is sick and kids play the doctor who can help. Use the opportunity to talk about feelings such as fear and gratitude.

Vehicles

- **CUSTOM CARS:** Have kids name their vehicle and give it a personality—or even special powers, like it can fly, turn invisible, or leap over great distances!
- **OBSTACLE COURSE:** Use other toys or items from around the house to arrange an obstacle course through which kids can maneuver the vehicle.



FACT

Traditional toys remain superior to electronic toys for children's language development because when toys talk, parents talk less, and as a result, kids vocalize less.



3 Ways to Boost Imagination Skills

1

EXERCISE IMAGINATION LIKE A MUSCLE

As with any skill, practice pays off, and the right equipment helps. Make sure kids have easy access to open-ended toys and everyday objects (cardboard boxes, dress-up items) that can be played with in a variety of ways. Screens and devices can be distracting while engaging in play with children, so keep them out of reach.

2

SHARE STORIES AND MORE STORIES

Experts say storytelling is the cornerstone of imagination development. Share stories throughout the day—either true tales from your childhood or fantasies you make up together. As language develops, let kids tell the stories or guess what happens next.

3

ENCOURAGE KIDS TO EMBRACE BOREDOM

It's important to give kids time away from television and video images so they can develop an inner space with their own vision. Giving kids the space to be bored, and empowering them to imagine their way out of that boredom, is one of the greatest gifts we can offer.



Developmental Play

“ In particular, children need to use their hands to explore and manipulate to strengthen those areas in the brain associated with spatial and mathematical learning.”

—The American Academy of Pediatrics

— MANIPULATIVES —
Object play
teaches hand-eye
coordination and
cause and effect!



— ACTIVITY STATIONS —
Exploratory
play develops
fine and gross
motor skills!



— SORTERS & STACKERS —
Shape sorter
play promotes
color and shape
recognition!



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Through play, kids learn to master new skills and develop their own ideas. This helps build confidence and a sense that learning can be challenging but also rewarding.

— PLAY PROMPTERS —

Here are some ideas you can use to spark kids' developmental play:

- ◆ **REACH & GRASP:** Help build gross and fine motor skills by placing pieces just out of reach and having kids pull them near.
- ▲ **SORT IT OUT:** Have kids sort pieces in different ways—by color, by shape, by size, etc.
- ★ **CLAP, CLAP, CLAP:** Encourage kids to clap two pieces together, softly at first, then loudly. Then play a clapping pattern and have them mimic it!
- **LOOKING IS TEACHING:** Make observations as you play together. Joint attention—caregivers and kids looking at objects while playing and talking—helps with social thinking and language.





FACT

Children learn and grow when they explore the physical world. Their minds learn best when they interact and play with parents, siblings, caregivers, and others.



3 Ways to Boost Developmental Play

Caregiver-child play builds trust and attachment. Strive to be responsive to the play cues served up by kids, building on their interests, but not dictating the action.

1

STIMULATE THE SENSES

As kids play, draw attention to their senses. Ask:

- What colors do you see?
- Have you ever heard a sound like that?
- Which looks/feels/sounds better, this or that?

2

FINE TUNE FINE MOTOR SKILLS

Give kids a way to practice their pincer grasp (using finger and thumb to pick up objects) by filling an empty baby wipes container with scarves for them to pull out. To help strengthen fingers and grip, give them wet sponges to squeeze or bury toys in sand for them to find.

3

PLAY MEMORY GAMES

Help strengthen children's memories by playing memory games with them to build both visual memory (what they see) and auditory memory (what they hear and read).



Problem Solving

“Problem solving through play with the ‘traditional favorites,’ such as blocks and puzzles, can support fine motor skills and language and cognitive development and predicts both spatial and early mathematics skills.”

—The American Academy of Pediatrics

— BLOCKS —

Building play provides lessons in problem solving and resilience!



— CONSTRUCTION PLAY —

Assembling parts promotes visual-spatial awareness!



— PUZZLES —

Puzzle play encourages logical thinking, goal setting, and patience!



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Individuals with strong problem-solving skills make smart decisions, don't act impulsively, and are willing to try again when at first they don't succeed. They are able to look at things from different angles to come up with innovative solutions.

— PLAY PROMPTERS —

Here are some ideas you can use to spark kids' problem-solving play:

Blocks

- ◆ **COUNT ON IT:** Encourage beginning counting skills by helping kids count how many blocks there are of each color or shape.
- ▲ **CHALLENGE TIME:** Ask kids to build something using a single color or shape. Then, challenge them to build a structure where no blocks of the same color or shape touch each other.

Construction Play

COPYCAT: Build something then challenge kids to build a version of it themselves.

- **BUILD A WORLD:** Use the pieces to build out an imaginary world (maybe a town, farm, or faraway planet). Gather other play pieces to help complete the world.

Puzzles

- **LANGUAGE LESSONS:** Have kids pick up pieces as you name what's depicted on each or what shape each is.
- ◆ **RAINBOW REVIEW:** Help kids identify colors on each piece. Have them find the same color on the puzzle board or on other pieces of the puzzle.



FACT

Building toys, blocks, and crafts help hone fine motor skills for kids of all ages. For young children, motor skills are closely linked to language development.

3 Ways to Boost Problem Solving

1

GUIDE THE PROCESS

When you see kids coming across problems in play or in life, help them identify the problem, come up with possible solutions, and test those out.

2

DON'T SOLVE IT FOR THEM

Give children space to solve problems, allowing them to make mistakes, and correct themselves. Limit your role to “scaffolding,” or building on their learning, such as rotating a puzzle to help them place a piece.

3

WORK TOGETHER

Try some DIY projects around the house or classroom so kids can see you in action, solving problems, researching solutions, thinking out loud, testing ideas, and not always getting it right the first time.



Creativity

“ Play with caregivers is most likely necessary to support skill development. However, solitary play can also have a role (especially for older children, for whom exploration and play with toys on their own time and pace can foster their independent creativity, investigation, and assimilation skills). ”

—The American Academy of Pediatrics



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— CRAFT KITS —

Crafting builds
confidence
and lets
kids express
themselves!



— COLORING ACTIVITIES —

Coloring
reduces stress,
and improves
concentration
and hand-eye
coordination!



— PAINTING & DRAWING —

Art projects
boost creativity,
fine motor skills,
and emotional
expression!





Brainstorming ideas, testing them out, and taking steps to finish a project are skills that will help children throughout their lives. Model brainstorming by pretending to not know what to do next and saying “Hmm, I think we’re stuck. What can we try?”

— PLAY PROMPTERS —

Here are some ideas you can use to spark kids’ creativity:

- ◆ **STORY TIME:** Have kids make up a story about the craft, drawing, or piece of artwork.
- ★ **MUSICAL ACCOMPANIMENT:** Suggest kids make up songs or hum tunes as they get creative. They can match the tune to the action, for example, coloring fast while singing fast.
- **CREATIVE CHALLENGE:** Work together on a drawing, taking turns adding elements. This helps build flexibility and collaborative thinking. Also, making a drawing for a loved one can be relationship-building and can help kids think about others’ emotions.





FACT

A survey of 1,500 chief executives found that creativity—more than rigor, management discipline, integrity, or even vision—will be required to successfully navigate an increasingly complex world.



3 Ways to Boost Creativity

1

MAKE SPACE FOR CREATIVITY

Designate an area where kids can be creative, feel comfortable experimenting, and even get messy. Provide as many supplies as you can, such as crayons, markers, paints, paper, fabrics, glue, child-safe scissors, stickers, buttons, yarn, pipe cleaners, and old brochures or magazines for collages.

2

GET INVOLVED

Try doing an arts and crafts project together. The outcome isn't important; it's about the quality time, the memory-making, and the engaging social interaction. It's a stress-reliever for caregivers, too!

3

PRAISE THE CREATIVE EFFORT

Children learn their self-worth through interactions with caregivers, among others. Be generous and positive in talking about children's creative ideas. Focus on praising their efforts rather than evaluating the piece for how well it lives up to a certain standard.



Language & Concepts

“In particular, toys that are most likely to facilitate development are those that are most enjoyably and productively used for play together with an engaged caregiver, because in such contexts play with toys is likely to include rich language experiences, reciprocal (‘serve and return’) verbal interactions, and scaffolding.”

—The American Academy of Pediatrics

— ALPHABET ACTIVITIES —

Letter play advances sight-reading, vocabulary, and spelling skills!



— NUMBER ACTIVITIES —

Number play helps with counting and early math concepts!



— GAMES —

Game play fosters memory retention, critical thinking, and social skills!



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Playful interactions—with friends and grown-ups alike—help kids navigate social terrain, negotiate terms, define norms, develop empathy, and so much more.

— PLAY PROMPTERS —

Here are some ideas you can use to spark kids' language and concept learning:

- **NEW RULES:** After mastering a game and its rules, try working together to come up with your own version!
- ▲ **SILLY SENTENCES:** Start with one word, then take turns adding a word at a time to complete the thought.
- ★ **LETTER PERFECT:** Use alphabet magnets or alphabet puzzle pieces to label different items around the house that start with that letter.





FACT

Play with traditional toys is associated with an increased quality and quantity of language interaction compared with play with electronic toys.

3 Ways to Boost Language & Concepts Skills

1

READ BOOKS AND MAKE CONNECTIONS

As you read stories, ask questions about the characters' feelings and connect them to children's own experiences. ("How do you think the bunny feels? Have you ever felt like that?")

2

GATHER FOR GAMES

Use playdates as a chance to teach friendship skills and game-playing social norms such as turn-taking and gracious winning and losing. Set out age appropriate games and show children how to greet another child, maintain eye contact, and invite them to play.

3

NARRATE THE ACTION

Get in the habit of narrating everyday activities. As you're driving, changing diapers, preparing meals, describe what you are doing. Kids pick up new vocabulary as they hear you use words in context.



Physical Activity

“ The use of toys in physical activity (such as playing with balls) has the potential to facilitate gross motor development together with self-regulation and peer interaction because of the negotiations regarding rules that typically take place.”

—The American Academy of Pediatrics

— BALLS —

Active play can develop coordination and social skills!



— TUNNELS —

Navigating obstacles builds gross motor skills, balance, and flexibility!



— GARDENING & NATURE —

Exploring nature offers connection to the larger world and a sense of inner peace!



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As babies and toddlers use their bodies and hands to manipulate objects, they make discoveries about the world around them.

— PLAY PROMPTERS —

Here are some ideas you can use to spark kids' physical activity:

- ◆ **OBSTACLE COURSE:** Create obstacle courses that require running, jumping, side-stepping, crawling, and more!
- ▲ **SCAVENGER HUNTS:** Get kids moving and exploring outside with different scavenger hunt challenges, e.g., find objects for each letter of the alphabet; find objects for the colors in the rainbow; find objects fitting different texture descriptions (soft, rough, smooth, etc).
- ★ **DANCE PARTY:** Introduce regular dance parties. Take turns teaching each other new moves that you create!





FACT

A study showed that 3- and 4-year-olds anxious about entering preschool, who then engaged in 15 minutes of active play, showed reduced levels of anxiety.²

3 Ways to Boost Physical Activity

1

GET KIDS MOVING

Studies have shown that physical activity helps improve cognitive function. Make sure kids are getting enough time for outdoor play both at home and in school. Children should get at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity each day, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

2

INVOLVE THE SENSES

Improving gross motor skills involves the senses. Try activities that get kids using several senses at once: for example, balancing on one foot while tossing and catching a soft ball to the beat of a song they sing!

3

PLAYGROUND CHALLENGE

Explore different playgrounds in your area as each will offer different physical challenges. Set a goal to try one or two new ones each month.





Join us *as we share the*
POWER of PLAY *with the world.*



Still reading? **It's time to go play!** You got this!



"Media & Young Minds," The American Academy of Pediatrics (November 2016)

"The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children,"
The American Academy of Pediatrics (September 2018)

"Selecting Appropriate Toys for Young Children in the Digital Era,"
The American Academy of Pediatrics (January 2019)

Read the full reports at aap.org