

Playtime

“There’s nothing to do!” As a parent who has heard that complaint, I would sometimes recite a list of all the toys and games that were in the house, wondering how my child could say that there was nothing to do.

It can be tempting to respond by using TV, video, computer or electronic games to keep kids occupied, but there are far better choices. As a parent, I needed to help my kids get involved in some active, child-directed play.

Play includes such things as making sand castles, play dough, playing in water, toy cars and trucks, dress-up, building with blocks, make-believe games, role-playing (such as playing ‘school’, ‘superheroes’, ‘house’ or ‘restaurant’), playing with dolls or toy animals, painting or drawing,

Why would it be important to ensure my children take part in these sorts of activities? If they prefer television, or computer games, should I be concerned? Are they missing out on something, or is the type of play described above just another choice of how to spend time?

Why play is important

Play helps in all areas of child development; physical, intellectual, language, emotional, and social. It allows scope for creativity and imagination.

Parents may be tempted to reduce play time and instead encourage their child to spend most of his or her time on activities such as flash card learning, educational videos, educational computer games, or structured lessons in a variety of activities. This is understandable, but misguided. As parents, we want to encourage the intellectual development of our kids, but it is well-known that children learn best from hands-on, interactive, concrete experiences. And we need to remember that the whole child needs nurturing, not just the intellectual area.

Many of the things children learn while they play are skills we take for granted as adults but are highly important to adult life, such as how to problem-solve, plan, share, give and take, recognize how others’ are feeling, explain, create, deal with disappointment or frustration, and learn to wait and take turns.

How Parents can Encourage Play

Children sometimes need some help to get involved in an activity, or in play. Yet often parents will put playtime on the end of the agenda, something that fills any extra time, rather than something to be encouraged, supported, and valued.

Most parents are well aware of the importance of daily reading with their children, and schedule a story time, to provide this important activity. It seems that fewer parents deliberately make time for playing with their children. When you think about it, you probably prioritize and organize to make the time to take your child to registered activities, such as dance, music, swimming lessons, and organized sports, but is there time in our busy lives for child-directed, unstructured play? Parents can make sure there is a play time each day for their children. If they seem bored with their toys, don’t seem to know how to start

playing, and typically prefer to turn on the television or the computer, that can be a signal to make a change in family routine.

Dos and Don'ts for young children's playtime

Don't

- play competitive games
- compete with your child
- ask too many questions
- make too many suggestions
- help too much
- expect perfection
- insist on continuing, or finishing
- take over
- insist on neatness
- insist that toys be used in only one way
- teach instead of play

Do

- play cooperatively so everyone enjoys and 'wins'
- avoid showing your superior adult skill
- make descriptive comments
- let your child decide on what and how to do
- let your child try to solve problems,
- be happy with the process, not the result
- let your child switch activities, or end the play
- let your child be the leader
- allow messy play, such as sand, water, paint, playdough
- allow creativity, e.g. a doll blanket can be a fort, boxes can be cars or a train, trucks can fly, lego blocks can be made into anything, not just the instructions
- let learning happen naturally, laugh and talk a lot

One very important 'Do' is to reward your child's quiet play with your attention. If your child is engaged and happily playing, take notice and praise and encourage. Sit down and take the time to allow your child to tell you what he is doing, and join in if he wants you to. In our busy lives, we may find ourselves only paying attention when there is an argument, something gets broken, or play becomes too rough.

Parents need to give our attention to the behaviour we want to see more often.

Try to have active outdoor play opportunities every day for healthy development. Spring has arrived at last, so enjoy play time with your children!

By Laurie Lafortune, Coordinator of the *Understanding the Early Years* Project. For more information on parenting, call Family Services of Central Alberta, your Parent Link Centre at 403-343-6400 or go to www.fsca.ca