

# PLAY IS THE WORK OF CHILDREN



We grown-ups usually see play as a break or a putting-off of learning or serious work. But as famous child psychologist Jean Piaget said, *“Play is the work of children.”*

Or in the words of Fred Rogers, *“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning.”*

When children are hurting or anxious – like after the death of a loved one, or living through the uncertain times of a pandemic – we as adults try to find ways for our children to develop, process, and heal from these experiences. We search for resources, activities or even professional help to assist our children in coping.

In our search for ways to help children, we often overlook one of the best resources they have available to them – one of the things they do best in facing difficult situations. That helpful resource is play. So why is play important for children?

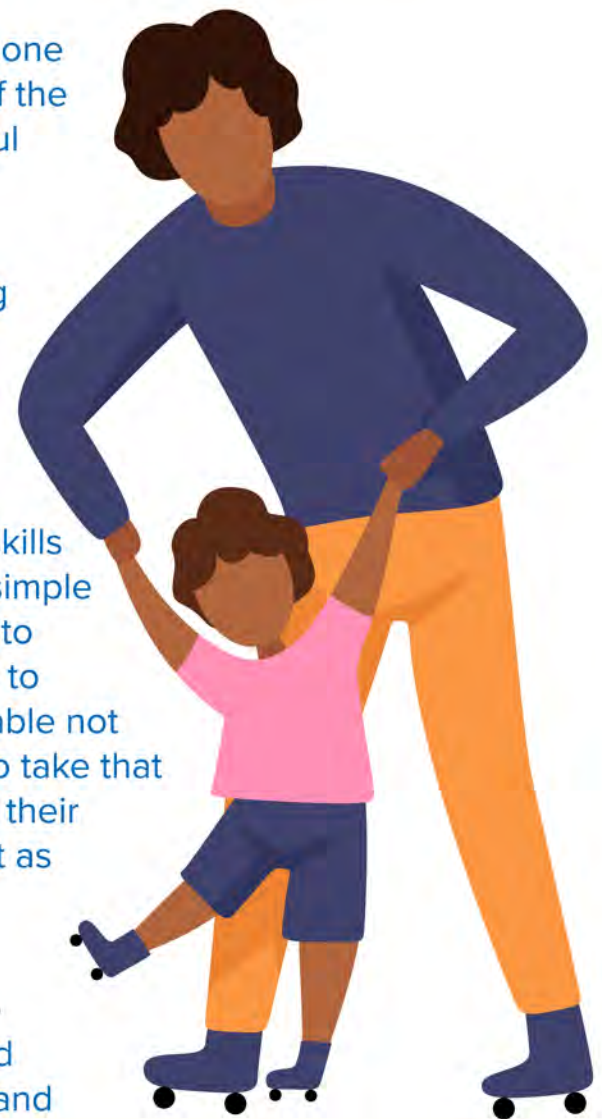
## **PLAY HELPS CHILDREN’S BRAINS DEVELOP**

The sensory and physical stimulation involved with playing (shaking a rattle as an infant, stacking blocks as a toddler, or playing house as a preschooler) helps to form the brain’s circuits. This wiring is the roadway that information travels along and is processed within.

This stimulation from play is the foundation for academic skills and for social/emotional skills later in life. Playing in such simple ways as blowing bubbles can help children’s brains begin to build the wiring connections that are needed to learn how to breathe deeply. Deep breathing is a skill that is then available not only for physical activity, but also for when a child needs to take that big deep breath when they’re scared as a way to regulate their bodies. Play for developing children is almost as important as eating and sleeping.

## **PLAY IS HOW CHILDREN LEARN**

Play is one of the first ways children begin to learn. Before being able to speak, babies learn through their senses and through interacting with the world around them. Toddlers and



preschoolers continue to learn cognitive skills, physical abilities, receptive/expressive language, vocabulary, social skills and literary skills through play.

This is why, when we teach a child letters and numbers, we don't simply tell them what an "A" or a "1" is and leave it at that. Children grow to understand these concepts through using many parts of their bodies and minds. We help children draw the letters and numbers, count out animals or other toys, draw the shapes with finger paint, sing songs about letters, make up dances, play hopscotch, clap and listen to stories about these "academic" concepts. Allowing children to play helps to lay the foundation for all other learning to take place.

### **PLAY IS HOW CHILDREN COMMUNICATE**

Before children learn to speak, they learn to play. Even when children do speak, it still takes some time for them to gain the language abilities to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings.

However, children can communicate these complex concepts through play in a way that feels safe and familiar. In times of stress, such as after the death of a loved one, children may not tell us they're sad, but they might play out a small baby crying and needing comfort from a parent.

Or in times of social isolation, children may play out being locked up by a police officer in jail. Play like this could be communicating the feelings or experiences of not being able to go to school or to go outside and see their friends.

It's important to notice what children might be saying through their play as a way to understand what's going on in their thoughts and feelings.

### **PLAY IS HOW CHILDREN REGULATE THEIR LIVES**

Children feel in control while at play. They can have their play world conform to their wishes and needs. In times of helplessness, fear or crisis, play affords children a strong sense of power and control.

Through play, children also learn moral judgement, empathy, competence and self-control, and begin to develop a sense of self. All of these build a foundation in children learning how to think for themselves, make their own decisions, and develop a healthy self-awareness. These are all vital skills for children being able to regulate themselves as they grow – especially after a death in the family, or during a significant crisis like COVID-19.

### **PLAY IS HOW CHILDREN GAIN UNDERSTANDING AND MASTERY OF CONCEPTS**

When children play, they are also gaining mastery over a variety of concepts. Play is a child's way of understanding the world and how it works. Big, difficult concepts such as "death," "separation," and "control" can be



experimented with through play.

For example, a preschool child buries a toy in the sand and uncovers it. The child saw Grandma get buried at the cemetery. How is the toy's burying the same as Grandma's? How is it different? The toy is still the toy; is Grandma still Grandma? If the toy can be unburied, can we unbury Grandma too? Through play, understanding grows, not only of what's right in front of them, but also of related situations and circumstances.

As another example during this time of mandatory physical isolation and strict limits on social activities, which can be very confusing for a child, think of a child pretend-placing their adult in Time Out. The child runs out of the room and then returns and releases their adult from Time Out. They might say, or think, "If I can let you out any time I want, why can't we go outside when you say so?"

Regardless of the words that might be connected to this game, the child can use this activity as an attempt to understand differences in separation and control. Especially at this time when normal activities are limited, children will attempt to understand these differences through their play.

### **PLAY CAN BE HEALING**

Using play, children can re-enact and re-live stressful experiences and gain a sense of power and control over them.

Through repetitive play re-enactments (such as replaying a funeral, or being told to stay inside), a child can gradually mentally digest and gain mastery over these stressful thoughts and feelings.

Many types of play can help children emotionally, socially and physically in all kinds of ways. Painting, for example, might help children relieve stress. Playing with dolls and making-believe about any number of human interactions (like the Daughter Doll being mad at the Mommy Doll) can help children experiment with negative (or positive) emotions and situations.

Smashing up and mixing playdough can channel physical impulses into activities that are socially acceptable. Taking turns while playing games can help children learn self-control.

Children show a natural tendency to cope with external stresses using play. This becomes even more important when the stress is higher, like in times of a death, or during a difficult crisis like we're going through now. Allowing children to play can help them to cope.

### **PLAY OF ALL KINDS**

It's important to keep in mind that all types of play are important



and meaningful, and can encourage different types of development and ways of learning.

Play of all different kinds -- including **physical play** (outdoor games, yoga, sports), **sensory play** (sand, playdough, slime), **dramatic play** (dress up, playing house), **artistic play** (drawing, painting, writing) and **constructive play** (building), among others – can create well rounded experiences for children to grow and learn in vital ways throughout their development.

## **CHILDREN'S PLAY WITH ADULTS**

As adults trying to play, we sometimes impose our “adulthood” on children.

We have a tendency to want to follow all the rules as they're stated. Or to insist on coloring within the lines. Or on basing pretend worlds in reality (“*Well, you know that could never happen in that way.*”)

While it's important to give attention to teaching children these important skills, it's also just as important to find a separate time and place where children can play freely – and where we can sometimes join them in whatever free-flowing rules they want to have in their play.

We need to find a balance between teaching children skills and allowing them to explore the world through play on their own terms. If we want to gain the most out of our children's play, the best thing to do is follow their lead, become a character in their world, forget the adult rules, and understand the world from their perspective.

This will let our children feel most in control, and therefore allow them to get the most out of their play experiences – especially when things get stressful. And – it will also be a lot more fun for us as adults when we're not worrying so much about the rules!

## **PLAY THAT SEEMS WORRISOME**

We understand that sometimes certain types of play can make us as adults feel uncomfortable. At the Caring Place, we've seen kids playing out many different scenarios that they have experienced as ways of trying to understand them better, sometimes with dolls or plastic people standing in as the “actors,” and sometimes with the children themselves doing the pretending.

This includes children playing that someone is dead. Or that someone is dying in the hospital and the doctors aren't able to save them. Or that someone died in their bed at home.

It's easy to wonder if this type of play means there's something wrong with the child. Or even if they might need professional help. As we've learned from how play works, however, this type of play is typical. In fact, it's often to be expected. It's the child's way of trying to understand very big, complicated and scary situations.



Allowing children to play these situations out will help them to continue to learn how to understand what is happening, what they can do to feel safe, and to communicate to you their needs.

If you do feel like your child's play is causing them significant distress, or has extremely explicit content that frightens them, or they seem to be "stuck" in a play situation that doesn't seem to shift or change in positive ways, or if they lack an interest in playing at all (withdrawing from things they enjoy), reach out to your child's teachers or a professional to see if some additional support would be beneficial. You can also contact the Highmark Caring Place if you have any concerns or questions.



  
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