

The importance of play

Play is the child's work – Maria Montessori

The saying "play is the child's work" highlights that play is not just a form of entertainment for children, but is crucial for their development, learning, and overall well-being, serving as a primary means for them to explore, learn, and grow. Play helps children to make sense of the world around them, build and navigate relationships with others, develop problem-solving skills and be able to express creativity. Play helps children to learn valuable life skills and can provide the foundation for future learning and well-being.



Here's a more detailed explanation:

- **Play as a Foundation for Development:**

Play is not just a form of entertainment; it's a fundamental aspect of child development, impacting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills.

- **Learning Through Play:**

Children learn through play by experimenting, problem-solving, and developing various skills, including language, creativity, and social interaction.

- **Importance of Play for Children:**

Play allows children to practice different life roles, understand relationships, and develop a sense of self.

- **Play and Learning:**

Play provides rich learning opportunities that cannot be achieved through traditional worksheets or structured learning.

Examples of Play and Learning:

- Playing restaurant allows children to practice writing menus, taking orders, and making change, thus reinforcing literacy and numeracy skills.

- Playing doctors allows children to practice first aid, but also teaches them about using empathy and responding to the emotions they see in others
- Playing board games teaches children to take turns, follow rules and structures and respond to winning and losing

- **Play and Creativity:**

Play encourages children to use their imaginations, explore new ideas, and develop creative thinking skills.

- **Play and Social Skills:**

Through play, children learn to interact with others, negotiate, share, and resolve conflicts, which are essential social skills.

- **Play and Emotional Development:**

Play also helps children develop emotional regulation, empathy, and self-control.

- **Play and Physical Development:**

Physical play, such as running, jumping, and climbing, is important for developing gross motor skills, coordination, and balance.

- **Play and Relationships:**

Play allows children to engage in activities with their peers and adults in their lives, which build relationship skills such as sharing, turn-taking, celebration, support and empathy.

- **Play and Well-being:**

Play is essential for children's overall well-being, providing joy, relaxation, and a sense of achievement.

Your role is crucial in creating these meaningful opportunities. The importance of these activities being purposeful and created to meet the child's developmental needs is critical. The importance can also be highlighted in intentionally designing play opportunities to help support their developmental needs across all four domains: cognitive, emotional, physical and social. Play helps to build the skills of confidence, problem-solving, resilience and a sense of curiosity.



Things to consider when creating meaningful play opportunities for a child include;

Do I have all of the resources and materials needed for the activity?

Ensure that the environment has all of the resources and materials ready to commence the activity. Ensure that any resources used are safe and age-appropriate to help support the intended play experience. This can include not just the physical space but also time; you want to ensure the experience is open-ended and not rushed.

Does the child have the skills or supports to participate and complete the activity?

Consider the child's zone of proximal development and whether they will need guidance, support, adaptations or encouragement to be able to engage in the activity. It is important to ensure a balance between challenging the child and ensuring that they can have fun and achieve a particular task in order to foster confidence and growth.

What do I want the child to learn from this?

Before commencing the activity, think about what you hope the child will gain from the experience. Will it focus on communication skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, gross motor skills or emotional regulation? By keeping this in mind, it will make the play more meaningful, purposeful and aligned to where the child is developmentally.

What is my role going to be during the activity?

Decide whether you will be an active participant, an observer, a facilitator, a guide or a co-player in the activity. Your involvement can shape the direction of the play, so consider how your presence in the activity can best support the child's experience without dominating it.

Further Resources:

[Zero to Three](#) – Play activities by age, tips for caregivers

[Raising Children Network \(Australia\)](#) - Evidence-based play ideas and parenting tips

[TED Talk – "The Decline of Play" by Peter Gray](#) - Insight into the importance of free play for healthy development



Podcasts about Play:

Not Just Cute: The Podcast – Hosted by Amanda Morgan

Focuses on intentional, developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood, including the critical role of play.

Topics: Play-based learning, child development, early education philosophies.

Raising Good Humans – Hosted by Dr. Aliza Pressman

While not exclusively about play, many episodes explore how play supports emotional regulation, independence, and learning.

Topics: Gentle parenting, brain development, play as connection.