

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

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Whether it was riding our bikes, playing with a favorite toy, or getting dirty in the mud, some of our fondest childhood memories involved playing. Play is what children do best and is an important part of every child's development. Through play, children learn to develop cognitive, social, language, and motor skills. Play allows children to be creative, problem solve, understand cause & effect, develop memory skills, and discover the power of imagination. These wonderful and valuable qualities are a few benefits of why play is important in the growth and success of our children.

STAGES OF PLAY

Most children 0 to 3 go through three main stages of play. Some children may need assistance and to be taught these stages depending on various factors and situations. One of the first stages is called Object Play. Young children learn to explore their world through the use of their senses; sound, sight, touch, taste and smell. They learn hand-eye coordination, motor and verbal imitation, listening skills and cause & effect. Concurrently, children learn to interact with others through Social Play. This stage emerges when children play simple games with parents and caregivers such as peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake. Later in development children learn to interact with peers. This stage is critical for children to learn appropriate social interaction skills, how to express emotions, initiate play, sharing and turn taking along with conversation skills.

Children learn through exploration, watching, and imitating others. This is why it is important for adults to be mindful of our actions so that children can imitate and model to their peers the positive things that we say and do. Pretend Play is a fun and creative stage for children. During this stage, children learn to pretend that objects are something other than what they really are. An example of this includes a child using a shoe as a phone, a stick as a spoon or a cup as a microphone. They learn role playing skills and begin pretending to cook, feed a baby, and drive a car.

THE PARENT'S ROLE

Parents are their child's first teacher. By taking 30 minutes out of the day to read a story to a child supports their future academic success. Parents can point to pictures in a book, label objects and ask open ended questions about people, animals, and objects. This stimulates expressive and receptive language, and encourages memory and attention skills. With infants and toddlers, parents can encourage floor time and exploration through toys, and activities and can encourage siblings and other members of the family to join in the play.

It's important for parents to learn how to have fun with their children. Pretending to be an animal, playing dress up, hide and seek, using imagination and creativity is all educational. Introduce your child to various textures; soft, hard, squishy, bumpy, rough, or smooth. Most importantly, the role of a parent is to create memories that will last your child a lifetime.