



Play

is serious business

With the changing lifestyles of people in urban areas and the changes in the urban landscape itself, children are playing less and less in parks or outside their homes, preferring to spend their time in front of the television sets or computer monitors. There is an alarming trend of increasing number of overweight and obese children, due to a combination of reasons, most important of which is lack of exercise and play. Play is many a time considered a time-wasting activity, and its benefits are not commonly well understood.

The importance of Outdoor Play

The benefits of unstructured and free play in the development of a child are enormous. Play may be outdoor or indoor. Playground activities provide for a large variety of muscular movements. Common outdoor activities are running, chasing, jumping, climbing trees and ladders, sliding down, playing on swings and see saws, cycling and ball games of throwing and catching. These activities encourage physical and motor abilities. It is through these play activities that children get an opportunity to exercise their growing muscles, strengthen them, develop coordination, endurance and flexibility and thus refine gross and fine motor skills.

Outdoor play also helps in developing balance, visual and spatial perception and coordination of various muscles to produce smooth movements. Consider children playing on a slide, swing or seesaw in a playground. As they repeat these activities over and over again, they're practicing and perfecting various movements, becoming better synchronized, more coordinated and their physical development is fostered.

Benefits of Indoor Play

Now consider an indoor play activity like stringing beads to make a necklace. Here the child is exercising the small muscles of the hand and fingers, practicing eye-hand coordination and fine motor development and dexterity of movements. The child may then go on and wear the necklace, pretend to be a princess, dance around or give it to a younger sibling to play with. She is not only exercising her fine motor movements, she is also being creative, imaginative and practicing social skills. This improves her self- confidence and self esteem.

Socio-emotional development

Games offer children opportunities of interacting with other children, builds their language and social skills. When a group of children are playing on the slide, each one has to await his or her turn. When a child falls down, other children may run to help him. When a differently-abled child plays in the park, it sensitizes the other children to his/her difficulties and builds empathy and compassion. Thus children learn from each other by observing, cooperating and being with other children.

The intellectual development of children is no less important. Board games and group and team games stress on different skills. There are rules to remember and apply, make guesses, devise strategies, and reason out answers. These games foster memory, sequencing, reasoning, logic, powers of observation and concentration. Children learn to analyze, deduce and anticipate and make decisions and choices.

Children often feel happiness, satisfaction and pride when they play well and complete a board game or win. They may feel anger, frustration and dejection too. This helps them to identify emotions and also express them.

Most importantly, play provides all these benefits in a way that is most suitable and enjoyable for children. Do you know any child who does not enjoy or does not want to play?

Play helps children:

- Develop their physical abilities - gross and fine motor skills
- Foster their mental and intellectual development - language and social skills
- Grow emotionally – helps them feel different feelings and cope with them
- Build self-esteem and self-confidence
- Create friendship and bonding
- Improve communication and interpersonal skills
- Prevent obesity and promote health.

Role of parents in developing play activities:

Parents have the responsibility of providing the child with opportunities for self-expression and growth through appropriate play activities. Parents need to see play as equally important as the academic achievements of the child. Specifically, they can gift their children their childhood by:

1. Providing opportunities for free and unstructured play
2. Allowing the child to choose the play activity
3. Taking children to the park or playground where they can interact with other children
4. Providing different materials to foster imagination and creativity
5. Not restricting or controlling the play activity, but being a facilitator
6. Providing opportunities for both indoor and outdoor play
7. Providing age appropriate activities, materials and games
8. Using household objects and inexpensive materials to help children play.

Guidelines for suitable toys and activities for different age groups:

Less than a year old:

Auditory toys such as rattle and piano, spinning and lighting toys, squeezing toys, toys with different textures, musical mobiles and boxes, imitative hand body games etc.

1-2 years:

Shape boxes, 1-3 piece puzzles, sand and water play, clay and modeling dough, pushing trolley, imitative toys such as kitchen set, toy telephone, dolls; nursery rhymes, crayons, color papers, fitting together objects.

2-3 years:

Scooter boards, cars, trucks, train sets, chalk and blackboard materials, clay, construction kits, building blocks, color and shape sorters, kitchen sets, plastic animals, birds, fruits, puppets, whistle, sponge painting, tricycle, play tunnel, story telling, nursery rhymes and songs, audiotapes, crayons and coloring books.

3-4 years:

Large beads, ball, scissors and colored paper, coloring, blow painting, mirror, cutting and pasting activities, puzzles of more than 5 pieces, color, size and shape sorter, imaginary play tea set, pots and pans, doll

house, memory games, stencils and templates, lacing card, dressing kits, scissors, crayons.

4-5 years:

Balancing boards, scooters, skipping, bicycle, origami, paper dolls, mazes, puzzles of more than 15 pieces, collage, snakes and ladder, ludo, shopping games, marbles, swimming, ball games, skating, dancing, story telling and cooking.

Play for children with disabilities:

Play is especially important for children with physical or mental disabilities. Such children are marginalized for lack of adequate facilities in schools, play grounds and public places. This further isolates them and makes them invisible, depriving them of developmental benefits of play that they need even more than other children. As they are not seen much in public places, their needs and necessities are not understood or empathized by others.

Being with other children gives them the desire to participate, interact and belong, which in turn motivates them to overcome their challenges. It improves their behavior, mood, cooperation, self-esteem and confidence.

If you have a child with special needs:

- **Do take your child out to play in parks and playground as much as possible.**
- **Build his/her language and communication.**
- **Provide opportunities and facilitate physical, mental, language and socio-emotional development.**
- **Teach the child self-help skills.**
- **Foster self-esteem and confidence.**
- **Sensitize others to the special needs of your child.**
- **Provide a supportive environment, so that your child can accomplish most things that other children do.**
- **Become an advocate for your child and his/her rights.**



a playground for ALL children

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