

## Play – What’s It Good For?

Much is being written lately about children’s play. As playtime is being more and more usurped in favor of what is perceived as more productive time, researchers and scientists are looking into the benefits of play. All animals play. In every species studied, the drive to play peaks between five and seven and falls off around puberty, after which animals don’t play much. Some surprising new studies are showing that peak playtime in certain animals is synchronized with peak growth rate in the area of the brain that coordinates movements in other parts of the brain. In other words, optimal brain development may require stimulation by the whole-body movements of play. More studies with rats show that play deprivation depletes neurological functioning, suggesting in these studies that there may be a link between play deprivation and ADHD behavior in children. Children with ADHD show delayed frontal lobe development in the brain.

Play has been seen for a long time across species as a contributor to the growth and flexibility of the brain. Play contributes to creativity, peer relationships, problem-solving, social competence, and even preparation for the unexpected. Play fighting has been described by one researcher as the improvisation of a jazz quartet forcing the child toward the capacity to respond rapidly to change. In addition, the physical movements of play fighting help the growth and development of the cortex of the brain. The rough and tumble of play has been linked with aiding children’s peer affiliations and social problem-solving flexibility. Fantasy play, when children dress up, use props, and devise stories, increases sophisticated language development and negotiation of roles.

Play can also be dangerous, scary, hurtful, and disturbing. Even genuine play can raise fears in parents because difficult emotions and inner “demons” often emerge. Parents are usually tempted to intervene with a civilizing force that denies the disturbing demons from acting out. Is this helpful or not for the growing child’s self-image?

Of course we want our children’s play to be safe, and it is our job to insure the play environment is child-friendly. However, depending on the influence of our own demons, parents can stifle the normal emergence and healthy release of thoughts and fantasies that children need to grapple with. Fairy tales are full of the unnatural and the fearsome. Children love them because they identify. Their inner lives are full of confusion, fear, and mystery. Super heroes and bad guys

provide role models through which children “try on” different identities to learn who they want to be and who they don’t.

The implication of the studies done on play and what play provides for children leaves us with the question of which is better for them: More lessons, flash cards, and adult structured activities or undiluted, genuine, child-driven play? My vote is plenty of time for the latter. Schools must understand the necessity for play as greater than simply providing time to release energy. Play is at least as critical to children’s growing brains as sitting in chairs learning academics. We must fight our temptation to cram more and more information into our children’s heads out of fear of losing the intellectual race. At what risk to healthy development is this race won?

At home, I encourage you to allow your children to play creatively, even roughly and even in ways that may look upsetting. We all have our demons. Perhaps if we had been allowed to act them out with more understanding and encouragement, they wouldn’t still be plaguing us. Aggressive play needn’t be violent, but we fear the direction toward violence and try to “nip it in the bud”. Children are more capable of working out the rules of play than we give them opportunity or credit for—especially when they are young and haven’t grown dependent on an adult instructing and supervising their activity.

Siblings play fight all the time. Often it looks worse to us than it is—especially if we hold expectations that children should never fight or hit each other. Often sibling fights involve animosity and vengeance when parents impose their fears and choose winners and losers based on who they think is doing the harm and being harmed. Siblings can develop into the classic tyrants and victims—not out of their own relationship but from what they have come to learn about themselves from their parents’ expectations and reactions.

First, give siblings more time to work out their problems before stepping in to rescue. Then, find out if their fight is play-fighting, in which case encourage the establishment of rules so they can stop it when it goes beyond play—but do allow them to come up with their own rules. Name-calling among siblings is not as harmful as we may think. But it can become harmful and derogatory when parents react harshly without understanding where it is coming from. Check it out with your children individually before assuming that harm is being done.

Play is a critical aspect of child development. Children learn many of the rules of living when given the opportunity to spend time in their imaginations and their physical bodies. We are wise to heed the necessity of play and do what we can to counter the movement toward less playtime and more academic time. We have made gross assumptions that our children are better off acquiring more knowledge at the sake of not moving their bodies enough. ADHD is growing in epidemic proportions, children are spending more and more time in front of alluring screens, and what play they do engage in is too often adult supervised and guided. We have forgotten what it feels like and how important it was in countering our stress levels and our physical and mental well-being.