

Getting Serious about Play



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A parenting special
from Suzanne North

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This Month...

- Fr 1 All Saints Day
- Sa 2 All Souls Day
- We 3 St Martin de Porres
- Su 10 **Ord Time 32**
God of the Living
- Mo 11 Remembrance Day
St Martin of Tours
- Fr 15 St Albert the Great
- Su 17 **Ord Time 33**
Endure
St Elizabeth of Hungary
- Th 21 Presentation of Mary
- Fr 22 St Cecilia
- Su 24 **Christ the King**
King of the Jews
- Sa 30 St Andrew

What are your childhood memories?

I immediately think of happy times playing in the garden, building cubbies out of cardboard boxes, climbing trees, inventing adventure games and baking cakes in the sandpit.

Research shows that simply playing is key to a child's cognitive, emotional and social development.

According to Professor Gray, a Professor of Psychology at Boston College, the drastic reduction in children's play in Western societies can have life-long consequences for children in terms of literacy, creativity, social acumen and mental health.



Print version

Leading developmental psychologists and educators agree that play is critical to children.

At the recent Young Mind's conference in Sydney, the consensus was that carefree and unstructured afternoons are more important for a child's development than tight timetables of structured after-school activities, play dates and year-around organized sport. Professor Howard Garner, renowned educator and Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, asserts that play is an important medium for formal and informal learning that is much undervalued in today's society.



So what exactly is play?

A basic definition is that play is a 'process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated'. Play provides the real learning playground where children learn essential life skills such as social and emotional intelligence. Through interaction with their peers, children learn how to socialize, negotiate, clearly communicate, solve conflicts, show initiative and demonstrate leadership.

Play gives children the freedom to be who they are.



It allows them to discover their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, which helps them to master their lives independently. Play gives children an opportunity to engage in healthy risk taking where they can learn new skills in their own time without experiencing external pressures. In play children face uncertainty, which teaches children to be resourceful, think creatively, improvise and make decisions for themselves.

The Upside of Failure

It is about learning through experiences and failure, which according to Dr Wendy Mogul, the author of “The Blessing of a Skinned Knee” is absolutely necessary if we want our children to be resilient and exert control over their own lives. Through play experiences children learn and hone their skills helping them to build confidence and self-esteem. Play enables children to find and pursue their own interests which in turn develops intrinsic motivation, a driver for academic learning.





The Neurology of Play

Play is fun. It is the most natural source of happiness. If children engage in pleasurable play activities, their brains release powerful chemicals leading to repetitive behaviours that strengthen synaptic connections. Stronger connections allow the brain to focus on new learning experiences, refining new synaptic connections and making them permanent. Not only does play foster brain growth, but it also assists in the development of self-regulation such as controlling one's emotions, impulses, behaviour and other cognitive processes.

Children who engage in open-ended and self-directed play are more focused on academic tasks.



Home: The Place for Play

The volume of recent research shows that children perform better academically and socially when they come from home environments that have provided ample opportunity to play freely.



Play is also very physical which is fundamental for the development of children's gross motor and fine motor skills. When children move around they refine their motor skills, gain better spatial awareness, balance, co-ordination and general awareness of their bodies. Children playfully learn about the law of physics such as heights, speed, distance, space and so on.

Moreover, moving around during play not only reduces obesity, it exercises the brain. Many studies in neuro-science have proven the direct relationship between movement, cognitive and linguistic development. Every sensory input that the child experiences through moving about helps the brain to build and hardwire new neural connections that are related to a particular experience.



A Story...

When walking my young daughter to the corner shop recently, I impatiently berated her at least five times to 'hurry up'. When she wanted to balance on the fence or look at the caterpillar on the path or pick some daisies, I scolded her and hurried her on. We arrived flustered, made our purchase and hurried home. When I read another mother's reflections on slowing down, I realized how my impatience was harmful. In my haste to get whatever I needed done, I was depriving my daughter of precious exploration time and I was depriving myself of the joy of watching her discover the world. I decided to surrender my 'haste' and to commit to just being present to her exploration. It truly transformed our relationship and put things in perspective. So what that the sheets weren't ironed, or the shelves dusted and the playroom is a mess? My little girl knew I loved her, delighted in her and that she was more important than my to-do list.

- Francine

Smart Kids Play

What amazes me is that we spend hours debating school choices and academic outcomes. We think that money buys us smart children. We allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by micro-managing our children's before and after school activities when life could be much simpler. Yet, we overlook the powerfulness of something that is given to our children naturally and freely from birth: play. It is through play that children acquire fundamental skills that they need for academic pursuits whilst becoming happy and well-adjusted creative thinkers.



As the renowned Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget once said:

“Play is the answer to how anything new comes about.”



These are survival skills that are needed to deal with global challenges in a fast changing world where nobody can predict the jobs of the future. In the wake of rapidly increasing depression rates and declining social literacy, it is time to make play a priority.

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Couple Play

Francine & Byron Pirola

Play is not only important for children, it's important for adults and for couples as well. It helps us to develop vital virtues in our relationship: curiosity, humour, tolerance and resilience.

Curiosity is a vital ingredient in keeping our love fresh, vibrant and open to growth. Couples who let themselves believe that they already know everything about each other, tend to lose interest each other. They become stagnant and bored with each other and begin to look for stimulation elsewhere.



Similarly, a sense of humour helps couples to overcome mishaps and frustrations that otherwise might leave us feeling resentful towards each other. Being able to laugh about our mistakes helps us develop tolerance towards our own and our spouse's faults and limitations. It helps us to be more forgiving and also more humble. It can turn a disaster into a positive bonding experience.

Couple play helps us bond and develop a bank of positive memories upon which we can draw during the inevitable tough times in a marriage. We remember fondly our newlywed years, when we were setting up our first home and doing all the decorating and furniture refurbishing ourselves.... and on a very tight budget! It was great fun and helped us build a sense of 'we'. When the newly-hung wallpaper began to peel because we were too thorough in squeezing out the excess glue, we were able to laugh about it instead of blaming each other.

A photograph of a couple playing water balloons in a park. In the foreground, a woman's hand is seen holding a yellow water balloon launcher, spraying water towards a man in the background. The man is wearing a light blue shirt and dark pants, and is also holding a water balloon. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor setting with green grass and trees.

**Couple play helps
us build relational
resilience.**

Couples who play together, stay together!



Daydreaming is another form of play of which children are masters and which seems to disappear in our ‘very serious’ married life. Yet how wonderful it is for us to daydream about our lover and playfully anticipate how we might spoil him or her!

Play also helps our love life too! And we’re not necessarily talking about sex-play! Having fun together relaxes us and bonds us, making us more receptive to love making and more playful with each other in the bedroom. Sheila Gray Gregorie recommends play in her blog “To Love Honour and Vacuum” with 14 great suggestions including, dancing, indoor nude volley ball and pillow fights: [here](#)

How's your playfulness?

Here's a quiz to test your Couple Play Quotient:

1 day ago (5), 2-5 days (4), 6-12 days (3), 13+ days (2), Can't remember (1)

1. When was the last time you laughed together?
2. When was the last time you had a date?
3. When was the last time you tried something different in your love making?
4. When was the last time you surprised your spouse with something nice?
5. When was the last time you were curious about your spouse's thoughts on a topic?
6. When was the last time you deposited a positive couple memory into your memory bank?
7. When was the last time you giggled while making love?
8. When was the last time you daydreamed about your spouse?
9. When was the last time you danced or sang together?
10. When was the last time you shared a recreational activity together?

Add up your score: Anything under 15 means that you are in serious play deficit. It's time you got serious about play!

Boredom Busters

The wonderful thing about imaginative play is that you can 'set and go' to other things whilst your children happily play. If your kids have become hooked on constant electronic stimulation and you hear the dreaded "I'M BORED!", we have a Pinterest board full of simple ideas to set your kids into imagination land and begin developing all those wonderful synapses that will help them survive adulthood!

Over-Scheduleding

Finding it difficult to bring play time in? Maybe your schedule and the kids activities have become a little too hectic. Check out our article on [Over-Scheduled Kids](#) for some practical tips to help de-clutter your family life.

