

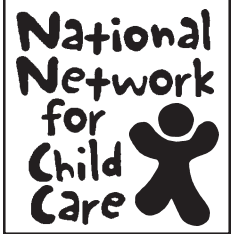


FAMILY CHILD CARE

Volume 13 • Issue 1 • 2004

CONNECTIONS

Sponsored by the Extension Cares Initiative



The Value of Play for Preschool Children*

Children play with everything—from dolls to blocks, from caterpillars to puppies. They often put aside a brand new toy to play with the box it came in. They delight in playing with things in the wastebasket or Mom's purse.

To some people, play is something to keep children amused and out of mischief. It is what children do until they are big enough for the serious work of school. But, in fact, play is more than a diversion. It is how children learn.

What do children learn from play? Many things. They learn about objects, events, and concepts (softness and hardness, for example). They gain various skills such as coordinating finger muscles. They learn how to group and classify objects and make sense of things. They learn about cause and effect and how to solve simple problems. They learn how to express feelings and get along with others. They gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. They begin to think about their world in new ways (by pretending to be someone else, for example).

Your job is to guide children's learning through play. You do that by giving children time and space to play, providing play materials that match their ages and development, and talking with them about their play.



Many parents have mixed feelings about play. They think it is all right for children to spend part of their time playing, but they worry that children are supposed to be "working" at learning. That is why many parents look for child care that will teach their 3- and 4-year-olds beginning skills in reading, math, and even computers.

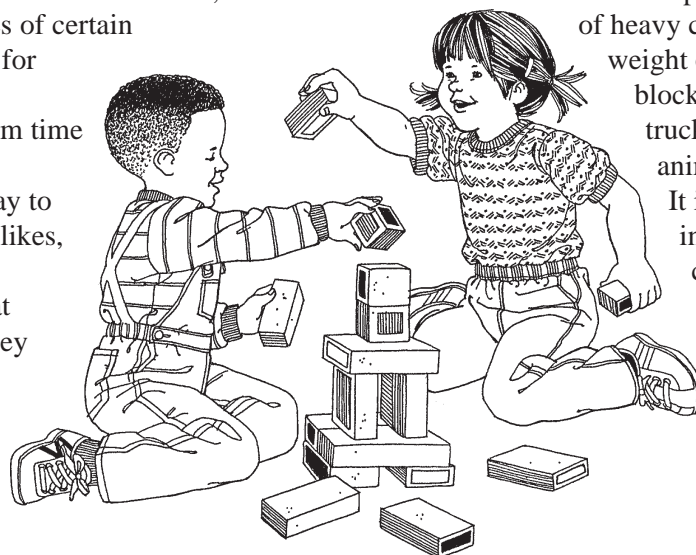
Play is children's work. Play is how children learn, and children at different age levels learn in different ways. Between 2 and 7 years, children learn by playing with things in first-hand experiences (learning that cotton is absorbent by dipping it in water rather than by being told about it, for example).

Children need time and space to play with little direction from anyone. Free play allows children to choose things that are meaningful and interesting to them. It allows them to learn in a casual, incidental way. An example is showing the child a room with blocks. You watch the child, respond to her, and keep her from throwing blocks, but essentially you leave the child free to do what she wants.

While free play is important, at times you will want to extend the children's learning experiences through directed play. You are the one who chooses an activity, and you do it with the children. One morning, for example, you have your preschoolers try finger painting with shaving cream. You spread paper on the floor, spray a mound of shaving cream for each child, and encourage the children to touch it and move it around on the paper. You talk about what you are doing and ask children how it feels.

Tips for Encouraging Play

- Give children plenty of time to play. Avoid offering play as a reward for finishing work or hurrying children to finish.
- Give children plenty of room to play. Arrange definite play spaces inside the home and in the yard.
- Provide a variety of interesting materials—household items, toys, art materials, books, puzzles. These do not have to be elaborate, but they should be appropriate to the children's ages.
- Remember that children's social development is different at different ages. Older children play cooperatively.
- Give children clear limits. This can be done not only by what you say but also by how you arrange the room and which materials you set out.
- Encourage children to put away one set of things before getting out another. At the same time, allow for some flexibility in the uses of certain items. Watch the children for cues, and plan to provide different sets of things from time to time.
- Watch children as they play to learn about their likes, dislikes, and interests. Encourage children to talk about what they are doing and how they feel. Use new words to expand their vocabulary.
- Join in children's play occasionally. Get down on the floor and build a



block house, or turn lunch into a pretend restaurant with you and the children playing waiters, cooks, and customers.

- Encourage parents to dress children in washable play clothes and sturdy tennis shoes. When children paint or do other messy activities, have them wear smocks (men's old shirts with sleeves cut out and buttoned in the back).

Play Areas

The first step in arranging play areas is to consider the ages of the children in your care. The space reserved for indoor play should be child-proofed and arranged so you can see children at all times.

You can divide the room into three or four basic play areas—blocks, pretend play, quiet play, and messy play, for example. Each area should have storage space. Toys should not be dumped in a toy box. Instead, use low shelves, baskets, and boxes labeled with words and pictures (so children will know what is inside) to allow children to choose what they will play with. Encourage them to put toys away after playing. Montessori classrooms have a rule: "One trip, two hands." This tells the children simply how many things they may use at a time. It also allows for a bit of creativity. For example, a basket of small blocks and a basket of farm animals might become a farm.

Block Area

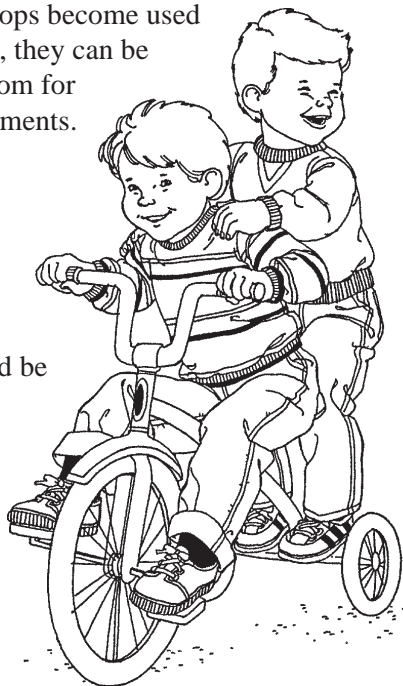
Of all toys, blocks can be used by the widest age of children. At first, children use blocks for stacking and knocking down. Later, they make patterns, and then they build structures that represent cars, buildings, or towns. Blocks can be made of wood or heavy plastic and come in various shapes. Some large blocks are made of heavy cardboard and will support the weight of a medium sized child. The block area should also have toy cars, trucks, planes, trains, people, animals, and tiny furniture. **NOTE:** It is sometimes possible to find interesting shaped "blocks" at construction sites. Be sure to ask if they mind letting you look at their scraps, and **NEVER** go onto private property or into the construction site itself.

Dramatic Play Area

This area should contain a small table and chairs, a doll bed, dolls, and dress-up clothes. Children will use these for make-believe—playing parent and baby, grocery store, space pilot, truck driver. You can change the props to suit the children's interests. Preschoolers may also get some good practice using things like zippers, snaps, and buckles. This area is one of the easiest and most inexpensive areas to set up. Open cans of vegetables, soup, fruit, and other foods from the bottom, taking care to smooth rough can edges. Leave labels in place, and rinse cans well. You now have a collection of groceries for the store. Old clothes can be recycled for use in dressing-up. Odd accessories, small plastic containers, old keys, and other "treasures" will combine to make this area fun. Many of the props will come from things you use regularly; there is not a need for much storage, as when the props become used and somewhat battered, they can be disposed of to make room for newly recycled replacements.

Quiet Area

Children need space to play quietly with puzzles, books, and games. This area should be away from the noisier activities. The floor should be covered with carpet or a rug and have soft pillows and maybe a teddy bear for hugging. You might want to add a child-size rocker or a big box for children to crawl in. You can also drape a sheet over two chairs to make a tent over the area to give children privacy.



summer days and a sunny place, out of the wind, for cold winter days. Arrange play equipment so you can watch children closely, giving a hand when needed, and so younger children stay out of traffic patterns of older children.

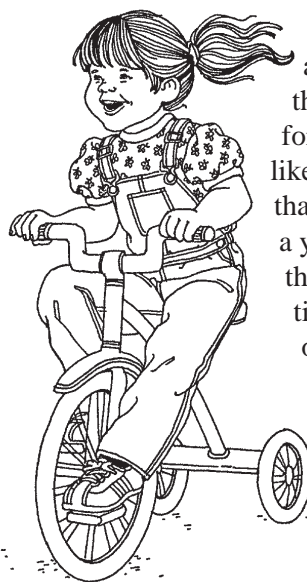
Note: Outdoor time requires active supervision just as indoor time does. Some care providers see outdoor time as a break in the "real" activities. However, many activities that take place indoors can be done outside as well. Consider sharing a book or storytelling time about rocks, bugs, trees or another feature of nature. Dramatic play, sorting activities, art, and music are all naturals for the great outdoors.

Observing the Children at Play

Make time to observe the children's play. Actually sit or kneel at the children's level and listen

quietly as they play. As you listen to their words and watch their actions, you begin to see the world through the children's eyes. It is easy for grown-ups to forget what it feels like to be small. It is also easy to forget that the most ordinary things fascinate a young child who is just discovering those things for the first time. Making time to observe will give you a world of new ideas for other materials and activities that might interest the children. It will also give you some great tidbits to share with parents. While we NEVER make fun of the children, we ALWAYS delight in the children's growth and

discoveries. Parents will appreciate knowing that their children have found new interests or acquired new skills.



Conclusion

Each activity of the day provides a unique opportunity to learn and grow. Often, child care providers will report that by seeing the world through the eyes of the children in their care, they are able to keep a sense of wonder and discovery about life. Relax. Realize that play is important to the children. Join in.

Outdoor Space

Ideally, children need a fenced yard or one bounded with shrubbery so they will not wander away. If the yard is not fenced, children should have a clear idea of how far they can go ("only to the tree").

Children should play outdoors every day unless the weather is too harsh. Because weather is such an overriding factor, look at your yard to see if you have a shady place for children to play on hot spring and

*Source: *The Child Care Provider Program: Training for Family Day Homes & Licensed Facilities*. Texas Cooperative Extension, The Texas A&M University System, 2002. Project Director: Linda Ladd, Ph.D.

Ideas for the Days When You Need “Something New”*

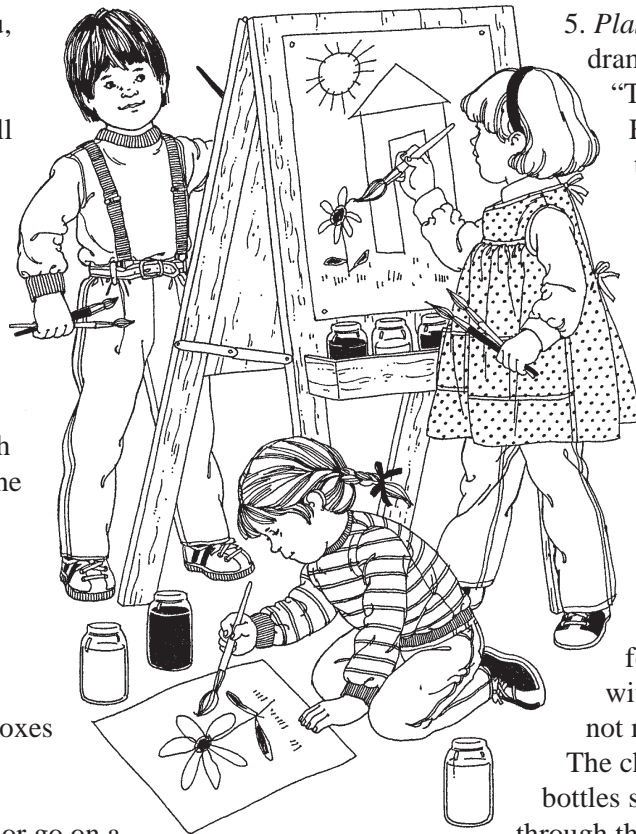
Following are some reminders of things to do when you need a change of pace. Materials suggested are either free or quite inexpensive. You may find it helpful to keep your own notebook of ideas.

1. *Boxes*—Use large boxes such as appliance boxes or furniture boxes to create play houses. Think creatively. Make one box a castle, another a western fort, and yet another a space ship. If there are no large boxes available near you, try building the same kind of thing with smaller ones. Any store that sells toilet tissue will have fairly large boxes that work nicely.

Use smaller boxes to create a town. Draw streets, ponds, trees, and other features onto an old sheet or shower curtain. (Note: if you use washable markers, it will wash out when you are done.) Let the children create houses, stores, hospitals, and more. It will be interesting to learn what buildings they think are important. Make horses, race cars, doll furniture . . . ask the children what they think the boxes should be.

2. *Rocks*—Find smooth rocks or go on a rock hunt with the children. Wash the rocks. Paint the rocks. Sort the rocks by size, color, and texture. Ask the children what they would like to do with the rocks—they’ll have lots of ideas.

3. *Collages, Mobiles, and Sculptures*—Gather magazines, yarn, scraps of wood, leaves (non-poisonous ones), weeds, ribbon scraps, and anything else that happens to be around. Make a collage on a piece of paper, or create a bird’s nest or sculpture of some sort from the collection. Older children may wish to attach items to a coat hanger to create a mobile. Hang the items from strings attached to the hanger. They will have an opportunity to create a work of art and learn how to balance the items on the hanger.



4. *Baker’s Clay*—Mold it, shape it, and use it just as you would clay except that you can bake the finished products if you wish. Baker’s Clay Recipe: 2 cups flour, 1/4 cup salt, 1/4 cup water. Knead until soft and thoroughly mixed. Bake pieces at 350 degrees until lightly browned. Children should not eat the clay, nor should they eat from the finished pieces. You will want to remove any spills before they dry, as the air-dried clay is very hard.

5. *Plastic Bottles*—Use for pouring, dramatic play, or science projects like “Tornado in a Bottle” or “Ocean in a Bottle.” Tornado in a Bottle requires two one-liter soda bottles. Fill one bottle 3/4 full with water. Place the mouth of the empty bottle to the mouth of the one with water, and use duct tape to seal them. The children can swirl the bottles and then set them down with the empty one down and see a mini “tornado” swirl in the water. Ocean in a Bottle can be created in a small baby oil bottle or something similar. Fill the bottle 1/2 full of baby oil and the other half full of water that has been colored with food coloring. Again, seal the bottle with duct tape. The oil and water will not mix, and the result is a visual delight. The children will be able to position the bottles so it appears that waves are flowing through the bottles.

*Source: *The Child Care Provider Program: Training for Family Day Homes & Licensed Facilities*. Texas Cooperative Extension, The Texas A&M University System, 2002. Project Director: Linda Ladd, Ph.D.

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