

TALKING IS TEACHING | COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The Importance of Play Curriculum by Dr. Amy Emerson Tulsa Educare Pediatric Consultant

“How many of you have vivid memories from childhood of playing? Can anyone share some of the ways you remember playing either alone or with other children?” (Pause for a moment and allow some sharing of ideas) Often the games and activities we remember were the most simple and inexpensive, and usually time spent outdoors exploring and pretending with others creates strong memories.

Playing WITH your child and giving your child the **time and space** to play are some of the most important things you can do as a parent! It helps you build a loving relationship together, and many important developmental skills are built during play in the first few years of life. Some examples of these skills which lay the foundation for successful adulthood are things like learning to share and take turns, building language skills, fostering problem-solving skills and understanding how to explore and create change in the environment around them.

Did you know that many organizations, such as the Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association for the Education of Young Children are calling attention to the importance of play in the lives of children? It’s the “job” of our children, and understanding ways we can support them during times of play can help build stronger brains!

Although children change the ways they play depending on their ages, there are several tips that can help make the most out of the times we intentionally set aside for play.

- **Follow your child’s lead** by allowing them to explore an object or activity and creatively use it. Describe what they are doing and copy them.
- **Be patient** and allow your child to make mistakes while they are learning to do new things. They are constantly gaining skills, even when it takes several attempts to complete a task. Your calm presence supports them and gives them confidence!
- **Practice makes perfect!** Remember that doing the same activity or reading the same book over and over helps children master skills and create success. Find fun ways to use silly voices or allow them to fill in the blank by pausing while reading a familiar book to change the pace a bit.
- **Turn off the distractions.** Develop a habit of turning off the television or putting the cell phone away when you engage your little one in play. This removes constant interruptions and allows them to become lost in a fun world of pretend play with you!

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When an 8 month old baby is given a wrapped gift, what happens? (Hold up a brightly wrapped gift and pause for comments...expect to hear comments such as “he eats the paper” or “he plays with the paper and ribbon more than the toy”). Little ones are almost always much more interested in the wrapping paper and the box than in the gift itself. It’s the process of unwrapping and exploring that creates opportunities for learning. Babies’ skills at this age are changing almost daily and their play becomes more complex with new skills.

Seemingly simple games like peek-a-boo and singing songs with fingerplays, like “Itsy Bitsy Spider” are actually complex forms of play that engage different senses and encourage a baby’s thinking and problem solving skills.

As a baby approaches a year of age, pointing to objects, putting objects in containers to pour them out, and rolling balls become fun games to play together. As you do these simple activities with your little one, it’s important to talk about the things you are doing together.

The next stage of fun play begins about 18 months of age when children start using symbolic play and will use objects to represent other things.

“Can anyone think of an example of symbolic play that you’ve seen?” (Pause for answers from the audience...may even use a prop such as a banana for a phone, bowl for a hat, a box for a car)

It’s important to realize that for all of these phases of play, your child is looking to you to play WITH them! Sometimes it’s important for us to remember just how vital these everyday moments can be for our little ones because there are always many distractions in our lives. Simply putting our phones down or choosing to wait on cleaning the house until later tells our children that they are important to us in that moment.

Once symbolic play begins, you will realize that your child has an amazing imagination, and with very simple props or objects, you can help your child create new worlds full of fun. Don’t throw that cardboard box away! Cut holes for windows or sit in it and pretend it’s a car. Allow your child to take the lead during your unstructured play, but remain involved in the world they are creating.

As children approach 3 years of age, they often begin pretending to be superheroes, community helpers, moms and dads. Scientists have learned that this is quite important as it helps children learn skills like self-regulation, which happens to be the number one indicator of school success!

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Much like an adult standing in front of a mirror practicing a speech or an upcoming job interview, pretend play can help your child practice using language and explore feelings about new situations or roles. When a new baby is born into a family, you might notice that big sister starts carrying around a baby doll and pretending to be a mom more. After a visit to the grocery store, your child might want to pretend to “shop” at home or pretend to be a cashier. When you engage in this pretend play with your child, it helps them understand how others might react in certain situations, and you are helping them understand the world around them better. Your only job is to make sure the play area is safe and simply follow your child’s lead. You don’t need to buy fancy dress-up clothes or expensive toys...it’s often even better to use what you have on hand and pretend.

Don’t ever underestimate the power of play, as it’s the place children learn to experiment and solve problems, pretend and grow their imaginations, learn language and practice social skills, and strengthen bonds with loved ones. Not only is it an important part of taking care of your child, it’s a necessary part and usually the most fun part, so the next time you find yourself “playing,” with your little one, give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done! There’s not a thing more important than being fully present in that pee-a-boo moment!