Play helps children feel good about themselves

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Children develop their social and emotional skills through play

Children learn more in the first few years than they learn at any other stage of their lives. Young children learn through their relationships with others and the world around them and they learn through play.

A good deal of children’s important early learning about how to express and manage their feelings takes place through play. Children’s play is ‘an important training ground for intellectual and emotional development’\(^1\). This learning underpins much of children’s future success and wellbeing.

How do young children play?

Children like games that test their physical abilities: running, climbing, jumping and exploring. These games bring children happiness and build confidence they can take into all areas of their lives.

Babies (birth to around 18 months)

- Enjoy playing on their own or with their parents and carers
- Learn about their world and understand it better through play
- Frequently look to their parent or carer for guidance and social play
- Play by themselves, with their own hands or feet or with toys that they can manipulate to make movement or sound (e.g., may practise hitting a rattle or crawl to reach something on the floor)
- Feel good when a task is not too easy or too hard
- Can manage only short bursts of intensive play, which can be tiring and effortful.

If you see a baby trying to make something happen, watch the baby’s expression. You will see if the baby is really involved and wants to keep trying, so you might offer encouragement. For another baby you will see it is getting too hard and the baby is feeling like giving up. Here a little help by moving the toy a bit closer might be just what the baby needs. The secret for babies, and for children, is to listen to the baby. At first you ‘listen’ to the baby’s facial expression, movements and different cries and babbles, later you listen to the child’s words. As you listen, you will learn when to help, by joining in, or making the task a little easier to achieve and when to let children do their own thing. You will also learn to read when the baby is tired and has had enough.

**Toddlers (around 18 months to three years)**

- Are starting to walk, practising their independence physically through their play (they can toddle away from carers) and verbally (saying ‘No’)
- Enjoy play space that offers them the opportunity to run, where they might play simple chasing and hiding games with you, and can practise their physical skills, as well as build independence
- Start to play alongside other children
- Are learning about friendships and may have some preferred, familiar playmates but are not yet sharing or playing collaboratively with peers
- Often like to do the same thing over and over before moving on to new things
- Are ready to move on when they feel really secure with what they know.

**Preschool children (around three to five years)**

- Learn a lot about who they are, how they fit in and how to get along with others through playing with their peers
- Engage in much more symbolic or pretend play where a toy or a child can represent many things. For example, Scarlett, aged five, sat in the yard with a branch on her head and announced that she was a tree. The branch could equally have been a crown, a magic wand or a sword, depending on where her imagination wanted to go
- Start to make up rules for games, who can be what, and what they must do. Games often break up at this early stage because someone wants different rules and children don’t yet have the skill to negotiate their differences.

**Play helps children develop a positive sense of self**

**Play provides opportunities for children to have power over what they do, what and how they learn**

Young children depend on the sensitivity of the adults who care for them. They often have little or no say about what they do, when they do it and when they stop. Their lives are often organised around an adult’s schedule. Children are put in and out of high chairs and cars, they are fed and go to bed when adults organise it, they go to preschools and often even dress according to adults’ wishes and preferences. Of course most adults are making decisions in the interests of the child, but in the eyes of the child they may feel quite powerless in many aspects of their everyday lives.

Play is different. In play, children have more opportunity to make decisions. This is important for their developing sense of self as it builds feelings of self-efficacy, competence and confidence. Play enables children to express feelings and practise roles. Through play children also learn to negotiate the give and take of relationships with others.

**Superheroes and fairies**

Many young children love pretending to be superheroes, fairies and other powerful and magical characters. Fantasy play allows children to feel powerful and magical, whatever the reality. They can wave magic wands and create a world of their choosing. They can fly, they can fight battles and save the world!

Adults may also make a time to talk with children about other aspects of being a superhero apart from power. Superheroes are often rescuers and save people; and fairies and superheroes can be either female or male.
Supporting children’s play helps children feel accepted and express their feelings

Acceptance builds a positive sense of self. Children learn they are accepted as they are, they will not be punished or judged for who they are or how they feel. Adults can help children to know their feelings are understood, and help them to learn to express their feelings in ways that are not hurtful to themselves or others. Children can be supported to express their feelings in many non-destructive ways through play using drawing and painting, water, mud and sand, puppets and dress-ups. This helps children to learn helpful ways of expressing and managing their feelings; a useful skill now and in the future.

Adults can show their support by commenting on the feelings the child is expressing. For example, a four-year-old who is drawing very angry pictures could be helped by an adult saying ‘That looks like a really angry bear in your picture’. If a child plays about hurt or angry feelings when an adult is near and the adult accepts this, it helps the child to feel acknowledged as a person.

Play can help children learn impulse control

If you are building a castle and you get frustrated and knock it down, you have lost your castle. If you are drawing a picture and scribble on it because it is not going right, you learn you no longer have a picture. In these ways children gradually learn that they need to control their impulses in order to achieve what they want.

Play is a way that children can work through and resolve problems

We all know talking about a problem with someone else helps find a way forward. Young children often do not have the language to really express their feelings but they can do it through play. As children grow and learn, their play becomes a basis for creativity in art or music or other ways of expressing themselves. These ways of personal expression can help them to cope with feelings all their lives.

For example, a child whose family has separated may feel very anxious about what is going to happen to them. These feelings and possibilities can be explored through play. The child can practise having two homes set-up with two houses and different dolls. The same applies to children who have moved house, as distance can be a difficult concept for young children to understand. There is no need for adults to take part, but being near while the child plays shows support and acceptance.

Play is a way for children to learn about their abilities and have mastery experiences that are important for building resilience and developing.
Play and developing children's social skills

As well as contributing to emotional development and building confidence in their own ability, children’s play is important for developing and learning the social skills that will be the foundation for children’s future relationships. These skills develop over time. The following table provides examples of how children’s play develops social skills in babies, toddlers and preschoolers.

Babies (birth to around 18 months)

- Babies love playing with parents and caring adults in joyful interactions.
- Parents take an active role in babies’ play with touch for example, in simple rhymes such as ‘This little piggy went to market’.
- Play with movement, for example, holding the baby while singing, swaying or gently dancing.
- Play with words, such as in simple rhymes, animal noises, books, blowing raspberries and playing peek-a-boo.

Toddlers (around 18 months to three years)

- Are starting to take an interest in other children and often like to play near another child. Mostly they do not interact with the other child, unless there is a toy that both want, but they play side by side.
- They often love to play with older children, where the older child enjoys making them laugh, and does things with the toddler without expecting that the toddler will share or cooperate.
- Toddlers are still working out how they fit in the world and if there is only one toy to share there are likely to be battles as each child struggles for ownership.
- When toddlers play near each other, they need close adult supervision and support because they haven’t yet learned how to manage feelings or relationships. Preferably have several toys that are the same so they don’t have to share or take turns.

Preschool children (around three to five years)

- Start to take more of an interest in playing together, seeing other children as playmates and enjoying the interaction.
- Friendships are still often short lived and related more to interest in a particular toy or game more than to the other child.
- They are learning to share and take turns and to think about how the other child who wants to play might feel. This is a good time to start having some one-to-one play dates, with adult supervision, to allow children not only the pleasure of playing together but the beginnings of learning about playing socially, sharing and considering others.
- As children move on into the year before school they enjoy more complex play. They may have long conversations about what the game will be and how the rules will be made up, who will be leader and who will be follower. These conversations are important parts of the game and learning about social roles and rules. There are lots of ups and downs in these games as children are learning about social relationships through their play.
Supporting children’s play benefits development and wellbeing

Children learn a great deal through play by themselves, with each other and with adults. The times when adults engage with children in their play can be very special for children. Setting aside even a short time for playing with children every day builds close relationships, as well as helping to build children’s self-esteem.

Adults can support children’s play in different ways depending upon the child’s needs. For example:

- If a child is busy playing, an adult may simply look on and get to know how the child plays, what they are good at and what they like doing.
- There are other times when children’s play is not working well and they need some help, such as when they get frustrated with something they are doing and want to give up.
- When a child is not already playing but is perhaps looking for something to do, it is appropriate for adults to invite a child to play. This may be to learn a new game, to listen to a story, to sing a song or just to have fun.

There are other times when adults can use play to teach children. For example if a child is playing at cooking, an adult might suggest the child draws the ingredients for a recipe. When we intervene like this we redirect children’s play so that it is no longer play in the same sense of being owned by the children. The times you might do this are when you see that children are looking for some direction or seem to have reached a point of not being sure of where they want to go, or when you are invited to join in by the child.

Children have different ways of signalling they would like some adult involvement in their play. Young babies who are just learning how to play might look at you as if they want to do something with you and be delighted when you teach them a new rhyme or finger play, a song or some other game to enjoy with you. Toddlers and older children will often let you know they want to play with you.

Sometimes play can become very boisterous and children may start to get out of control. This can be scary as well as exciting and it is up to the adult to set the boundaries to make sure it stays safe and enjoyable.

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The child’s world view is the starting point for play.2

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This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.