



## Play Is Important for Healthy Child Development

By Sharon Cowen

*Q. I am the single father of three busy kids. While they enjoy the activities they participate in, I feel like we are always stressed and on the run. I wish we could get away from this hectic lifestyle, but I worry that I won't give my children the opportunities other kids have. What can I do?*

*A. Parents and caregivers today often feel pressure to plan structured activities for their kids through daycare, school, or community resources. Even young children may participate in a variety of activities that includes tutoring or academic enrichment, sports, music or other cultural programs, faith-based education, or just plain homework. Because parents*

want to ensure their children's future success, they may feel the need to fill every moment.

Moreover, many families need to rely on extended child care, after-school programs, or other settings where children are safely supervised while parents work. The result may be a harried lifestyle with stressed-out caregivers and kids.

Structured parent-scheduled activities help children grow and learn in many important ways. However, many kids have little time for free play—play they design themselves. Free play offers many benefits, and parents should ensure that children balance those opportunities along with structured, adult-planned activities.

As infants, children start by playing next to each other—*parallel play*. They may notice each other and play with similar toys, but they don't cooperate. As they grow and develop, children start to relate to other children, building a fort together, for example, or playing together with dress-up clothes. This is the start of *social play*. As they experience playing with other children, their social play becomes more involved. Throughout the process, they learn new skills.

According to Kenneth Ginsburg, MD, of the American Academy of Pediatrics, play designed by children rather than by adults contributes to intellectual, emotional, social, and physical development. Play is critical to the developing brain. It allows children to use creativity and imagination, master essential physical and social skills, and explore adult roles.

Starting at a young age, child-driven play permits children to develop social abilities in sharing, working in groups, negotiating with peers, resolving conflict, and advocating for themselves—all important life skills. Children also discover their own interests, make decisions, and try out new activities. Active play, as distinguished from passive play such

as computer games and videos, allows kids to develop small and large muscles, gain physical abilities and build healthy bodies.

Much of play should involve adult monitoring to ensure that play is safe and kids are using good social skills. However, caregivers should avoid intervening too soon and controlling too much, to allow children the chance to work things out for themselves.

Play also provides a positive link between parents/caregivers and kids, an important opportunity to enjoy time together. It offers time for hugging, laughing, and expressing love and affection. Play with caregivers can be quiet: reading, coloring, doing puzzles, playing board games, or telling jokes and riddles. It can also be active: playing ball, jumping rope, sledding, racing. Cold winter days make chances for active play a challenge for parents and caregivers. However, even on cold winter days, being active is important.

Free play designed and driven by children serves an essential role in healthy growth and development. Encouraging and promoting positive play is a vital part of caring for children.

*Sharon Cowen is Family and Consumer Resources Educator, University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, Hillsborough County.*