

# **10 things parents should know about the importance of play**

## **1. Children learn through their play**

Don't underestimate the value of play. Children learn and develop:

- Cognitive skills – like math and problem solving in a pretend grocery store
- Physical abilities – like balancing blocks and running on the playground
- New vocabulary – like the words they need to play with toy dinosaurs
- Social skills – like playing together in a pretend car wash
- Literacy skills – like creating a menu for a pretend restaurant

## **2. Play is healthy**

Play helps children grow strong and healthy. It also counteracts obesity issues facing many children today.

## **3. Play reduces stress**

Play helps your children grow emotionally. It is joyful and provides an outlet for anxiety and stress.

## **4. Play is more than meets the eye**

Play is simple and complex. There are many types of play:

- Symbolic
- Sociodramatic
- Functional
- Games with rules

Researchers study play's many aspects:

- How children learn through play
- How outdoor play impacts children's health
- The effects of screen time on play
- The need for recess in the school day

## **5. Make time for play**

As parents, you are the biggest supporters of your children's learning. You can make sure they have as much time to play as possible during the day to promote cognitive, language, physical, social, and emotional development.

## **6. Play and learning go hand-in-hand**

They are not separate activities. They are intertwined. Think about them as a science lecture with a lab. Play is the child's lab.

## **7. Play outside**

Remember your own outdoor experiences of building forts, playing on the beach, sledding in the winter, or playing with other children in the neighborhood. Make sure your children create outdoor memories too.

## **8. There's a lot to learn about play.**

There's a lot written on children and play. Here are some [NAEYC articles and books about play](#). David Elkind's *The Power of Play* (Da Capo, 2007 reprint) is also a great resource.

## **9. Trust your own playful instincts**

Remember as a child how play just came naturally? Give your children time for play and see all that they are capable of when given the opportunity.

## **10. Play is a child's context for learning**

Children practice and reinforce their learning in multiple areas during play. It gives them a place and a time for learning that cannot be achieved through completing a worksheet. For example, in playing restaurant, children write and draw menus, set prices, take orders, and make out checks. Play provides rich learning opportunities and leads to children's success and self-esteem.

# **How to Support Children with Special Needs through Play**

## **What is the Importance of Play?**

Play is incredibly valuable for all children but having special needs can present barriers which may make it difficult for them to fully enjoy the experience. The needs of little ones vary a lot, so it's often down to you, the parent or carer, to understand the challenges and adapt to your individual child.

It's really important to avoid losing play value in favor of accessibility; simply being able to do something isn't what makes it enjoyable. Just remember to focus on what your child can do, rather than what they can't, when planning play time. Play should be freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated – in other words, a child with special needs might need a little support, but they also need the freedom to decide what to play and how to go about it.

## **The benefits of play for children with special needs**

Children generally learn and develop a lot through play, and those with special needs are no different. In addition, play can support the specific difficulties your child might have.

For example, if your child has a hearing or visual impairment, play can help strengthen their other senses to help them navigate and explore the world. If they have a mobility impairment, play can exercise their muscles and improve coordination.

Children with autistic spectrum disorder may be less social or imaginative with their play. They may instead show interest in non-toy objects, and get enjoyment from things like counting or sorting objects – this is still playing! You can use their interests to encourage social and imaginative play, by joining in with the activities they enjoy.

A child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may also struggle to play socially, because their symptoms, such as having difficulty waiting their turn, can sometimes put other children off playing with them. Play can give children with

ADHD the chance to express themselves and exert some energy, and with some adult guidance can help them build relationships with other children too.

## **Sensory Play**

Exploration and discovery are key to play and experimenting with different senses can be very enjoyable for children. Stimulating these senses also strengthens connections in the brain which are important for all types of learning.

The benefits of sensory play for children with special needs include:

- Cognitive development: understanding how things work, comparing the characteristics of different materials
- Social skills: Children can watch how others play, copy and share ideas
- Self-awareness: Children learn what materials they like and don't like, increasing their understanding of themselves
- Physical development: Sensory activities can be a good workout for the small muscles in their hands and fingers (known as fine motor control)
- Emotional development: Play can be a good release for energy or stress, and means children can also express positive feelings
- Communication skills: Whatever their level of language development, children can express their reactions to the materials, e.g. showing excitement at splashing water, or surprise when they experience something new.

Remember to adapt to your child so they can get the most out of their play experience. For example if they are hypersensitive, introduce new materials carefully, and be aware of those they do not like or if your child has a mobility impairment, make sure the activity table is accessible.

## **What is sensory play?**

Sensory play is any activity that stimulates the senses. There are five main senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, and two other less-known senses, vestibular (sense of balance) and proprioceptive (sense of where each body part is in relation

to the rest of the body). The more kids use their senses, the more they develop them and the ability to learn using them.

### Why is sensory play so important?

- **Helps kids learn:** The more senses a child uses when learning something new, the better equipped that child is to remember and recall information later.
- **Builds language:** When kids describe a sensory play activity and how it feels as they experience it, they gain an understanding of words and that helps them develop a rich, descriptive vocabulary.
- **Promotes social interaction:** Children of all abilities can participate in sensory play. Peers who are typically developing may be apprehensive to approach a child who looks or acts different than they do. Sensory play activities can naturally entice kids to come close and investigate. Getting kids in close proximity to one another is the first step to interaction.
- **Develops motor skills:** Whether kids are making waves in a water table or drawing circles in shaving cream, they are strengthening the muscles in their body that are needed for daily living activities like zipping a jacket or brushing their teeth.

When you contemplate a sensory play activity for a child in your life with special needs, take into consideration not only what they'll learn, but also how they'll experience it —and then promote the areas that make the most sense for each child.

- **Kids who are blind or visually impaired** may not gain a tremendous amount of value from fourteen different shades of green crayon on simple, white copy paper. They may benefit more from enjoying a coloring activity on different textured paper – like bumpy, corrugated, and scratchy (e.g. sand paper).
- **Kids who are deaf or hard of hearing** may miss the verses in a song, however, they can feel the beat of the drum and the vibration of whistles and kazoos. Music can be part of sensory play for kids who are deaf or hard of hearing if you can help them feel the music.

- **Kids who have physical limitations** may not have the control to easily follow intricate paint by number patterns but may find success with stamps and washable stamp pads, where elaborate masterpieces are created with simple movements.
- **Kids who have sensory processing issues** are a little trickier. Some are highly sensitive to sensory stimulation while others have low sensitivity. For kids who crave more stimulation, add scented extracts or small beads into homemade playdough. Or finger paint instead of using a brush so their fingers feel the coolness and movement directly. For kids who are overly sensitive, finger painting may still be an option – but have the kids wear rubber gloves or put different colored paints in a sealable plastic bag so they can experience how the colors mix and move without ever having to get paint on their hands.

With sensory play, as with all play, safety is important. Keep these tips in mind when you are preparing your sensory play activities...

- **Supervise:** Whether it's directly or within earshot, children should always know there is an adult nearby to help, if needed.
- **Be aware of overstimulation:** For some children, flashing lights are a sensory delight to watch; for others, those same lights may instigate seizures. Be aware of your child's needs and limitations.
- **Make sure they are developmentally appropriate:** Keep age, abilities, and skill in mind when choosing an activity. If children are still exploring with their mouths, make sure the activities you introduce have pieces large enough to not present a choking hazard and are non-toxic.

By providing opportunities to explore in different ways, you are helping children identify what they like and dislike. How they learn best. What calms them and what excites them. Use the senses to guide you in understanding your kids and helping them learn.

[A Parent's Guide to how your baby and child learns when they are playing](#)

[Baby Has A Full Conversation with His Daddy Video](#)