

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2024-2025 News & Notes



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The Importance of Kids' Free Play

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

An Incalculable Gift

It is often said that the “work” of children is play. Through playing games, play acting, and participating in playful activity, children are readying themselves for life as competent, resilient adults.

“Free Play,” according to the National Institute for Free Play¹ (NIFP), “is the nature-provided means for young humans to develop the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical abilities they’ll need to survive and thrive on their own. . . . Children naturally play freely and joyfully. They assemble blocks, draw, dance, and run without worrying about rules, criticism, or the ‘right’ way to do things. They are not constrained by fear of failure or judgment.”

To underline play’s essential value, NIFP states, “Free Play has been so strongly proven to be critical to healthy development that the UN High Commission on Human Rights classified it as a fundamental right.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics² outlines the many ways play supports child development: “Children learn by exploring their environments and building context from their experiences. Learning thrives when children are given control of their own actions.

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“Play builds motor competence to master fine and gross motor skills, and the confidence to engage in more active play. Motor skill competence lays the foundation for preferences of physical activity.”

“Play enables social skills such as listening to directions, paying attention, resolving conflict, and negotiating relationships. Play and stress are closely linked. High amounts of play are associated with low levels of cortisol. Play, when supported by nurturing caregivers, may affect brain functions by buffering adversity and reducing toxic stress.”

“Play supports language development by asking children to decipher meaning and listen and observe cues from others.”

“Play allows children to practice the language skills they have learned and build on their expanding vocabulary.”

“Play builds skills such as intrinsic motivation and executive functioning. Executive functioning includes working memory, flexible thinking, and self-regulation.”

CIP Executive Director Dr. Robin Joy Berenson emphasizes the emotional value of giving children the chance to spend some play time alone to do as they wish. “Free play allows children to work out their emotions, especially difficult feelings, such as frustration, fear, or sadness, which contributes to the development of resilience, self-

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knowledge, and a rich inner life, important lifelong benefits.”

Additionally, she recommends that parents spend unstructured time with their children, including creating special play times where the child takes the lead and the parent follows.

Free Play versus Academic Pressures: Striking a Balance

The National Institute for Free Play notes, “Over the past 50 years, the time children have for Free Play has decreased dramatically. . . . This decline can be traced to several intertwined causes, including increased time in school and related academic pressures. . . . While academic and extracurricular pursuits are important, it is crucial to recognize the value of Free Play time.

“The situation can be mitigated in several ways: Allow children to choose extracurricular activities that truly engage them, and that are intrinsically motivated. Create a balance that includes time for Free Play along with extracurricular and academic activities.”

Fortunately, the ways to encourage children’s engagement in free play are simple. By providing the unstructured time, enough space (inside or out), and age-appropriate materials, you have set the stage. No special equipment is required. Young children enjoy many toys, such as stuffed animals, dolls, blocks, balls, and dress-up clothes and more, but other, common household materials also invite creative play: cardboard boxes, pots and pans, and container bins. Water play with plastic dishes, or

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sandboxes can make for hours of happy discovery, as can sidewalk chalk, crayons, paper, scissors, and watercolors. The list is limitless.

1 <https://nifplay.org/play-note/child-play/>

2 <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/early-childhood/early-childhood-health-and-development/power-of-play/>