

by Jessica Parks, MSW, LCSW

"Mama, check this out! I made an ark like Noah!" I entered the living room the other day to find that my four-year-old had stripped the cushions off the couch and created a large 'boat' for her stuffed animals- two by two- to escape a flood. This seemingly silly, perhaps slightly irritating, activity is in fact the primary way through which children begin to learn about and understand the world. My daughter was learning about physical balance, sorting, engineering, weather, and scripture through play; she was doing so without direct intervention or guidance from any adult.

As Maria Montessori observed, "play is the child's work." Play is necessary for children's effective learning, developing physical strength, understanding language, developing problem-solving skills, connecting with caregivers and peers, processing and expressing emotions, and beginning to know their creator God, who is himself playful.

### What Is Play?

The word play has many meanings. Children 'play' video games, they 'play' flute. The kind of play we will discuss here is activity in which children engage that is self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and imaginative (Cambridge Handbook of Play, 2019). Play, in its most beneficial forms, is chosen by, directed by, and created by the child. Play is a process that changes with the child through developmental stages, from the peek-a-boo of babyhood to the complex playground games of older children and beyond. All the while, play engages children in exploration of the world around them.



## **Children Learn Through Play**

Play provides opportunities for skills development. A child learns about compromise and cooperation when he attempts to build a block tower with his peers. A child learns to clearly communicate and effectively lead when she engages others in playground games. Children learn about the complex beauty of God's created world when digging in the mud or observing seashells. All of this is play. All of this is learning. These play experiences, and countless others, occur naturally when children have access to unstructured time.

## Children Connect and Manage Stress Through Play

Play helps children manage stress. At a time where children experience increasing academic and social pressures, play is an essential tool for coping with difficult emotional experiences. Research indicates that play is related to reduced cortisol- the stress hormone- levels in children (Pediatrics, 2014). Play also facilitates healthy attachment between children and their parents. Parents experience increased bonding with their children through engaged interactions, specifically play. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends play for these reasons, stating that the "mutual joy and shared communication and attunement…that parents and children can experience during play regulate the body's stress response (Pediatrics, 2008).

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### **How Parents Can Encourage Play**

Many parents, especially busy parents of young children, struggle to find the energy or motivation to engage in play with their children. It certainly can be difficult to come home from work and jump right into an imaginary submarine or blow bubbles with your child when there is dinner to make and laundry to do. Here's the good news: while playing with your child can be challenging, a little goes a long way.

Here are some strategies for encouraging play for your child:

- Make time for play. It is tempting to fill our children's schedules full of enriching activities. Although learning an instrument or exploring science are also beneficial, they do not replace unstructured play. Make room in your child's schedule for imaginative play.
- Limit screen time. Video games and social media may have a role to play in a child's life, but screen time is not unstructured play. Again, make time for play without distraction.
- Focus on your child. Put away any of your own distractions, like cell phones. Be as present as possible, setting aside thoughts of your 'to do' list. Set a timer for yourself if necessary, and communicate that your child has your full attention until the timer alarm sounds.
- Allow your child to choose the activity. Make suggestions only when necessary for safety or when requested. Attempt to enter your child's frame of reference and engage with them there.
- Observe and ask questions about what your child is doing, such as "I see you put the red block on top. What will you do next?" Questions like this help facilitate language development and planning skills. Asking questions also communicates that you see your child's play as worthwhile.
- Allow your child to direct the play. As difficult as it can be for adults to relinquish control to children, play is an appropriate time to do
  so. Allow your child to lead. Did her stacking blocks suddenly turn into a pack of lions? Roll with it. Your child is doing the work of play.
- Follow up. Say "I really enjoyed building blocks with you today. Thank you for showing me how you balance the blocks and sharing your toys with me."



Adults often see a child's play as loud and disruptive, but Jesus did not see it that way. He welcomed and encouraged children, instructing us all to

"welcome...these little children in [my] name" (Mark 9:37). With or without parent encouragement, children play. As parents, grandparents, and other caregivers, we have an opportunity to protect and encourage children's playful nature. They play to grow, to learn, to connect, and to cope. They play because God created them to play.



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