



**UNSW**  
SYDNEY

## Why is play important?



## WHY PLAY IS IMPORTANT

What if you were told that there was something you could do every day to help your child learn better, feel better, behave better and grow better? What if you were also told that it would not cost you a cent? Finally, what if you were told that your child's doctor says it is an essential part of childhood?

So, what is the answer? Let the children play! Play has scores of benefits for a child's learning and wellbeing:

- Physical development, including coordination and fine and gross motor skills;
- Social development, including the development of skills in collaboration, negotiation, and conflict resolution;
- Emotional development, such as helping children develop persistence, self-regulation and empathy for others;
- Cognitive development, including inquiry skills, the development of scientific and mathematical thinking and literacy skills.
- Creativity, including divergent thinking and generating multiple approaches to solving problems.

## PLAY IS A DOCTOR'S ORDER

Internationally, Paediatricians have become so concerned about children's access to play in childhood that they have prescribed it as a necessity for holistic development. Recently, we approached Australian Paediatricians to see if they shared this view and Dr Johanna Thomson from the Sydney Children's Hospital told us that:

*Children learn through play. Unstructured play allows children to creatively explore their environment, develop problem solving skills, promotes skills in language and negotiation through interaction with other children, helps regulate emotions and enhances physical health. So crucial is play in a child's development that some paediatricians have even started prescribing play for children of all ages.*

*In our modern busy world, with the pressures of performance and the influence of technology, it is tempting to see play as frivolous or optional. But play is fundamental for optimal child development and the acquisition of skills required to navigate the world in later life. It is our responsibility, as parents and caregivers, to create stimulating and nurturing environments for our children and ensure they are provided opportunities to play every day.*

Paediatricians are concerned, because the research is clear. The benefits are countless, and diverse. So when your child is playing, you can feel confident that they are doing exactly what they need to do as part of a holistic childhood. What might look like a simple process is actually very complex. Children use and develop a myriad of skills in even a simple playground game. Skills they need for their future, like resiliency, creativity, problem solving and how to stabilise their emotions.

If your child has time and opportunities for play, they do better on almost any measure of success. They are happier, can regulate their moods better, they focus more at school, they sleep better, they get along better with others, they are more successful and well-rounded. Children learn best through play, and there are countless benefits derived from play time, but they also really enjoy playing just for play's sake. However, children continuously tell us that they do not have enough time to play at home or school.

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child, which includes the Right to Play (article 31). Children need time to be free, and to explore, investigate, experiment and create in order to learn about the world around them in an unstructured way. So as a society, we have a responsibility to let children play. Yet more often than not, we are finding that play is restricted or treated as a reward. This must change. Play must be a part of every child's school day and happen in every child's home.



## PLAY AT SCHOOL

It is vitally important that your child has access to play at school. And not only in early years but throughout the entire school. In a recent poll we undertook, 85 per cent of Australians agreed that children today spend less time playing compared to when they were growing up. A further 93 per cent agree that play helps children to build the skills they need for the future. Yet, despite recognising its value, little has happened to make play a more prominent part of the school day.

Optimally, we would like to see increased recess or breaks during school days and more learning through play in the classroom. While there will always be demands placed on teachers and students by an increasingly crowded curriculum, and formal learning structures as the norm, as parents we must push back on this and be advocates for a child's play.

Australian schools must re-think their practice regarding play. If you are lucky to be at a school that offers opportunities for more play in the school day, please give play a chance and get on board and support what they are trying to achieve. Be part of the conversation with your child's school and other parents to ensure everyone is on the same page about recognising the need for increased play time.



## PLAY AT HOME

As a parent, what can you do at home to support a child's need to play?



Make time for unstructured, free play as regularly as you can. This might mean re-considering your extra-curricular schedule or putting away the screens in favour of visiting a playground or letting them roam around in the garden.



Get outside every day and in any weather-outdoor play offers the optimal benefits to children and natural elements stimulate a child's creativity beyond what toys can. It is OK to let your child be bored sometimes, too. When a child has time to create their own experiences, their imagination works hard.



Provide a wide range of developmentally appropriate toys. The right kinds of toys can enhance a child's developmental outcomes. These need not be expensive, as long as they are open-ended and encourage a child's imagination. If resources are stretched, you could use things like the local toy library to provide your child with a wide range of toys.



Play with your child when you can. Research has found that the benefits of play are even more pronounced when parents play with their child and pretend, talk, build and interact.