

CHILDREN'S PLAY

Think of preschoolers playing. You probably picture them chasing each other, playing house, painting or coloring, and basically just having fun.

For preschoolers, playing is an especially important tool that 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds use to learn about themselves, others, and how their world works.

Every child wants to learn. That desire causes a child to constantly do things like moving, splashing in puddles, dressing like adults, etc.

Playing helps preschoolers develop physically, socially, and intellectually. That is why a 2-year-old plays differently than a 4-year-old. The 4-year-old can already grab fat crayons and draw squiggles. He/she is ready for skinny crayons, paint brushes, and coloring or painting figures that portray people.

If you had to study all day, it would get boring and your study would be fairly unproductive. You must have a break to refresh your mind and eat something. This concept is similar to why preschoolers need to play. The delight and pleasure in play enhances their physical and intellectual development. The best way to keep a child happy and learning is to let him/her play.

Allowing children to play will give a child confidence. While children are playing, adults do not have to tell them how to have fun or what to do. They make up their own rules, games, and guidelines. This teaches them independence and gives them self-assurance.

If a child just sits watching television for hours, he/she does not have the opportunity to actively learn and interact with other children and toys. Children who have not been allowed to play are not ready for school. They do not know how to explore, how to learn, how to make friends, or how to find information by themselves. Do not allow children to watch too much television. Encourage them to play. Make up games or have a friend over to play. Make the play active and fun.

If you watch two preschoolers of different ages, you will see that they play in different ways. The way a child plays is related to his/her physical, mental, social, and emotional development. During the first eighteen months of life, most children's play involves sitting up, crawling, standing, and walking. A child who has learned to crawl will follow a rolling ball across the room.

A 3-year-old child has mastered walking. The child then tries to kick a ball and chase other children.

Three- and 4-year-old children have better control of their large muscles. They like tricycles, blocks, paints, and clay.

Play also builds language and social skills. Children learn social skills by playing with one another. They learn how to take turns, how to share, and how to deal with their own emotions and the emotions of others. Language skills are developed as the child hears adults speak and tries to imitate them.

As children grow, they become more interested in other children. Most 2- or 3-year-olds participate in *parallel play*. This means that they play by each other with similar toys, but they do not really interact or play with one another. This type of play is appropriate for their emotional development. They are egocentric (selfish) and have a difficult time sharing. They like to do things their own way. Common words are "me," "I want to" and "NO!" These words help them decide who they are.

When a child is somewhat self-assured, he/she can relax a bit and begin playing with other children. This happens around age 4.

When children pretend play, it helps them express and cope with their emotions. For example, a child who is afraid of the dark may build a fort and play inside it. Going in and out of the darkness helps that child work out fears about darkness.

Intellectual learning also occurs during play. Playing with nesting blocks teaches basic math concepts such as "bigger than." Hide and seek teaches terms such as "under," "inside," "around," "between," "over," etc.

Playing is how a child learns and how he/she develops physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. Remember, play is a child's work--the most important work they will ever do!