

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Play is all about fun and enjoyment and is key to learning in the early years of your child's development. Play can be unstructured, also known as free play, or it can be structured. Free play is led by your child and helps to develop your child's imagination and creativity. This might include deciding how to play with a doll or truck or imagining that the sitting room rug is a magic carpet. Structured play tasks have rules and a plan to guide the child in the play activity.

Structured play activities are useful when teaching a skill through play such as maintaining attention to the task, turn taking, and learning that each game has a start and an end. These include card games, board games, a game of tag/chase. It is important that your child experiences both types of play. As your child grows and matures they begin to interact and play with other children and adults moving from playing on their own to playing more collaboratively with others.

**The following strategies are commonly used in Occupational Therapy and are recommended to develop your child's play skills;**

**FREE PLAY:** Let your child lead as they develop creativity, imagination, role playing, social interaction and problem solving skills using toys, objects or their environment. For example they may decide to turn their bedroom into a jungle or camping site or use dolls to set up their own tea party. They may like to dress up. Let your child choose what they want to play with. Let your child create or imagine the game to be played. Ask your child to give you a job when playing chef/kitchen, being a shopkeeper or doctors. Give your child a large empty box and ask them what could this be? For example a school bus, a race car, a boat.

**STRUCTURED PLAY TASKS:** Structured play tasks have rules and an end goal. They can help your child to develop attention and concentration, motor skills, turn taking, sharing, organisational skills and problem solving in a more structured way. Types of structured play include; card games, board games, matching and pairing games, tag/chase, or obstacle courses.

**PLAYING ON THE FLOOR:** Moving onto the floor when playing helps to bring you into your child's world. It makes play fun and there is less structure compared to sitting at a table for play. Toys can be spread and are less likely to fall off a table. It also encourages more opportunities for make believe/pretend play.

**TOY PLAY:** Observe your child's interaction with toys and their use of toys in play. Are they showing an understanding of the toy's function. For example you might observe your child creating a pretend game that they must bring the toy car to the garage for repair. As opposed to only appearing to enjoy spinning the wheels of the toy car.

**SYMBOLIC PLAY:** For younger children under eighteen months of age a block can appear as just a block. However as your child develops play skills and creativity they learn that a block might also be a car, a phone or even a bird. Observe your child's ability to turn objects into other objects. For example answering a make believe phone that is ringing could be symbolised by your child bringing their hand or toy banana to their ear to answer. They may turn a cereal box into a race car. They may symbolise an action of what steering a pretend car would look like?



**PROBLEM SOLVING THROUGH PLAY:** Encourage your child to think of solutions to problems in play. For example; 'I'm not sure 'Mr. Teddy' is feeling very well today? Oh I don't think this customer is happy with their pizza, what should we do? Oh the wheel of this car has a puncture, what should we do?'

**SOCIAL SKILLS:** Help your child to understand and develop turn taking and sharing when playing. Use words such as 'your turn, now it's my turn'. Discuss feelings. Explain to your child that you are feeling happy that you also got a turn at the game. Help your child to become comfortable with both winning and losing. Set up a game where your child gets to experience losing as well as winning. This will help them to understand that everyone gets a chance to win but not winning every time is ok too. Discuss how you feel when you win at a game and that it is nice when other people win too so that they feel happy. Play games or with toys that require collaboration/team work such as Lego, building a tower together or pretend kitchen. Praise good social interaction skills such as sharing and turn taking, waiting their turn.

**CAUSE AND EFFECT THROUGH PLAY:** Play helps your child to learn that their actions can cause something to happen in their environment. Toys that help your child to develop an awareness of cause and effect include those that elicit sounds or movements when an action is taken, pop up toys, toys that make music when a button is pressed, buckaroo or a popping pirate game. Learning about cause and effect is an important part of your child's development as they begin to realise that in order to get something they need to use their body, language or behaviour.

**MESSY PLAY:** Messy play is an important sensory experience that helps your child to become used to touching, smelling and interacting with various textures that are dry or wet. Messy play ideas include finger painting, forming shapes in shaving foam or flour, paper mache, baking, gardening or playing with compost.

**SENSORY PLAY:** In addition to messy play your child will benefit from engaging with toys and activities that help to introduce them to various sensory experiences with light, sound, touch, movement and taste. This might include; ball pits, climbing through tunnels, sand boxes, dancing to music, musical statues, jumping into bean bags, trampoline use, swings, slides, digging for worms, blowing and bursting bubbles and tasting sessions such as 'what is it?'

**COPING WITH TRANSITIONS:** Your child may need support to understand that every game has a start and an end. You can give your child a five minute reminder that play time is almost over. For younger children where language is developing you could show them a picture of lunch to show them that it is now lunch time. This might help with the transition. You could use a sand timer to indicate to your child that play time will be finished when all the sand has dropped. Sand timers with various times from one minute to five minutes can be purchased online.

**MAINTAINING ATTENTION TO THE PLAY ACTIVITY:** Card games such as animal snap and matching games are helpful for your child to learn about the need to attend and concentrate. Musical statues and musical chairs can also help your child to learn about the need to hold their attention and to keep focused. If your child is distracted easily or moves/flits from one activity to another you may need to remind them that 'we must finish this game first before we move onto that game'.

**TIDY UP TIME:** Tidy up time helps your child to learn about organisational skills, gathering and sorting. Storage boxes could have a photo of the toy to be stored to make it easier for your child to sort their toys.

**OUTDOOR PLAY:** Visit the playground, build a tree house using branches, play tag/chase, hopscotch, build sandcastles.

