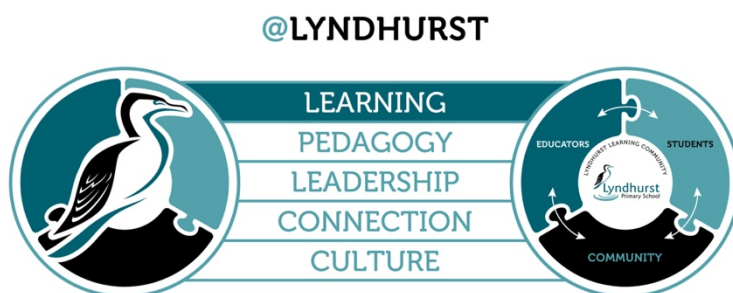




The importance of play



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As a parent, you want your children to learn all that they can—to grasp math concepts, to be curious about exploring the world, and to learn to read and write. Did you know that you can help your child academically, by playing with them? Play and learning go together!

What kind of play helps children learn the best?

Play that really engages children—play that they will focus on and stay with even when problems arise. This kind of play helps children develop their approaches to learning—in other words, the ways they respond to learning situations. Curiosity about the world, initiative and problem solving, and focused attention and persistence are just a few approaches to learning that children develop through play.

In the early years, parents can help children develop the skills to be better students by playing with them. Yes, as they enter kindergarten and the primary years, children need to have some understanding of letters and numbers. However, if they have not developed solid approaches to learning, they will not be as successful in school settings.

Encouraging Toddlers at Play

Joey is 20 months old. He has a basket full of toys, including rattles, soft plastic blocks, a set of stacking rings, stuffed animals, and cloth and plastic books. Joey's dad often sits down on the floor with Joey and invites him to play with items in the basket. Joey's favorite activity is to dump out all of the toys and put the basket on his head! This is typical toddler play behavior. Joey is curious about the world and is looking at it another way—through the slats in the basket!

Joey loves to shake the rattles to hear the different sounds or to stack two or three blocks and knock them down. His attention to each might be up to five minutes or so, which is just right for his age. He may solve problems as he tries to place the rings on the stacking post or to add more blocks to a tower.

Joey's dad encourages his curiosity. He comments about what he is doing: "I see you are trying to get that last ring on the post, but it just won't fit." Or he asks him questions: "Where did that ball go? Do you see it hiding behind the chair?" He connects his play to learning by responding positively to his interest: "I can tell you like to look through the basket, you silly boy. Does everything look different from under there?"

He also encourages him by asking him to keep trying even when he gets frustrated. "Oh, those blocks keep falling down, don't they? Can you try to put just one on top of another gently? Let's see what happens. I'll help you." This encouragement fosters his perseverance, his attention, and his initiative at problem solving, all positive approaches to learning.

Play in the early years

Alicia is a 4 year old. She loves to dress up, and pretend to go shopping, care for her teddy, and have a party. Through her pretend play Alicia learns to think abstractly. When she holds a block in her hand and uses it to pretend to talk on the phone, she is using the block as a symbol for something else. That's abstract thinking in action! And, since letters and numbers are abstract because they are symbols of what they represent, pretend play is one way a child develops their understanding of letters and numbers.

Alicia's mom and dad have recognized that supporting her pretend activities keeps her engaged for 10 to 15 minutes at a time. They pretend right along with her, asking her to "bake some cookies" or to "go grocery shopping" for them. They give her paper and crayons so that she can pretend to write grocery lists. They encourage her to count how many items she has placed in her toy shopping cart. They accept her scribbles and letter-like shapes as her writing (just right for 4-year-olds) and help her when the numbers get a little mixed up.

Alicia will work with puzzles for long periods of time, too, especially if her dad joins her. Together, they figure out strategies for putting the pieces together. She may turn the pieces around, trying out different ways until she is successful. She is developing problem solving and persistence as she does so.

Play in later years

Play continues as a prime developmental requirement for children all through the primary years. In fact, there is research to suggest that play can also be a strong contributing factor for mental health and well-being. For adolescents and teenagers. As children grow older, we as parents, often timetable children's lives with "organized" activities like sports and the arts. Whilst these are important, free play like simply exploring a forest or digging in the sand or building a bush cubby builds problem-solving, creativity and independence. Play can also be great down-time for children in their busy lives, giving them time to just be themselves, experience quiet and solitude and to calm busy brains.

Your Role as Your Child Plays

Playing with your child helps keep your child engaged in the kind of play where learning occurs. Your interest, questions, and comments as you play alongside will help your child use toys productively. And the two of you will have lots of fun together! Most importantly, you will be working toward your child's future success as a student by building important approaches to learning. Play and learning go together!

Independent play

Of course, you don't need to play with your child the whole time. Independent play is also a wonderful tool for development. On their own, children can be incredibly creative and engaged as they use their imagination and make up their own games, challenges and problems to solve. Play that is unstructured and lightly supervised allows freedom and encourages creativity in play.