



Inclusion for children
and young people
living with disability

Learning Through Play

Play is children's work. It is the way they learn and explore the world. You help your child to learn as you get involved and follow their interests in play.



Play

- Children learn best through play, it could be thought of as children's work.
- It is how they explore the world around them.
- Play underlies other learning
 - Physical skills
 - Language skills
 - Social skills
 - Early maths
 - Self regulation
 - And more!



Interest-based learning

- Children learn best when they are engaged in play that interests them.
 - Personal interests, e.g. a child who likes playing with trains
 - Situational interests, e.g. a child who sees puddles on the way to preschool so decides to jump in them.

Teaching new skills

- Children learn so many new things in their first five years of life.
- You can help your child learn
- Aim to teach things that are just beyond what your child can already do.
 - In this way your goals are right for your child's stage of development.

Teaching new skills - examples

- Over the next month, I want my child to put two words together when we are playing with blocks
 - If the child can already say one word, e.g. “more”
- I want my child to go downstairs holding the handrail before their next birthday
 - If they can already do this holding someone’s hand
- I want my child to use a spoon to feed themselves all their cereal at breakfast by the end of the month
 - If they already do a few spoons by themselves.

Watch!



How play helps child development

In this video, experts explain that play gives children different sensory, physical and cognitive experiences. Experiences build connections in the brain, which helps children develop physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. That’s why children’s play is like ‘fireworks’ going off in the brain.

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*You can support your
child's development
through play by noticing
what they are interested
in and building on that*

Child led play

- Children learn most when in charge of their own play.
- if they feel like you are testing them (e.g. by asking lots of questions), it no longer feels like play to them.
- It is important to join in your child's play without taking over

Benefits of child led play

- Builds confidence when children see their ideas are valued
- Children learn to problem solve and work things out for themselves.
- Supports their curiosity.
- It helps children work through their emotions.
- Can be fun for both of you.



Difference between child and adult led play

Child

- Child chooses what to play and how.
- No specific goal or outcome, e.g. using playing cards in imaginative play
- Use resources creatively, e.g. uses a frisbee for a hat
- Lots of opportunities to talk about what is happening

Adult

- Adult chooses what to play
- Often more structured and more rules, e.g. card games
- Specific goal or outcome
- Use resources in the expected ways, e.g. frisbees are just for throwing
- Often lots of questions directed at the child

*Some adult led play is okay,
but children need time when
they are leading the play
with you involved*

You make a difference

- You are your children's first and most important educator.
- Being regularly involved in your child's play is a great way you can support their development.
- Your involvement makes more of a difference than any educational toys.

Playing with
your children
is important

Following are some strategies you can use to get involved.

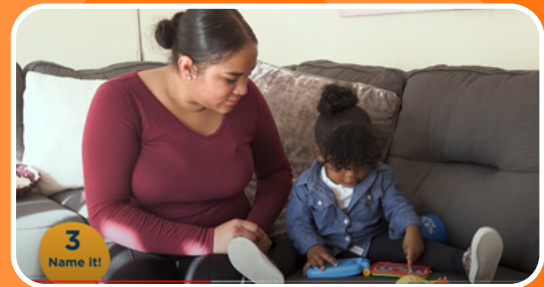
- Get down to their level
 - This may mean sitting or lying on the floor so you can be face to face with them
- Take time quietly to watch what they are interested in
 - Remember, they may play with toys in unexpected ways.
- As you join in, keep playing the way they're enjoying, don't change the game.
Join in without taking over

Serve and return

- This is a way to think about letting your child lead and joining in without taking over.
- They 'serve' with an action or word, and you 'return' by responding to what they did or said.
- Another way to think about this is taking turns with your child



Watch!



5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return

© Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

But...child led play feels strange

- Child led play can feel very different to how you usually interact with your child.
- It is a big change, for both of you as you let them lead more.
- It is okay that it feels strange, keep trying and gradually it will feel more natural.
- You may feel like you are not doing anything because you are not using questions to work out what they know or teaching them in a structured manner.
- Rest assured, they are learning lots as you get involved!

Start small

- Change is hard, so start slow.
- Over time the way you play will become more child led
 - You could start by getting down to your child's level and making sure you make one comment about what they are doing before asking a question.
 - Try for even just 1 minute where you join in their game and don't change it. Then build from here.

But... how does this fit into busy lives?

- Sometimes it feels like there is no time in your day to add time to play into the diary, even if you know that it is good for your child. Following are two ideas that may help:

15 minutes of focus

- Plan 15 minutes a day where your sole aim is to play with your child.
 - Get down to their level
 - Let them lead the play for the whole 15 minutes, choosing what you do and how.
 - Talk together about what you are doing but don't use many questions, so your child does not feel like you are testing them
 - Get rid of anything that might distract you, e.g. turn off the TV, put your phone on silent



- Make this a special time of connection that both you and your child look forward to
- It might take awhile for your child to get used to this time, but if you do it every day they will start to enjoy it and will have great ideas of things to do!
- If 15 minutes does not feel possible, try for even just 5 minutes then build up gradually.
- Having your complete focus, even if only briefly is great for your child's development and their relationship with you.



Play in routines

- There are so many things you do everyday that can be an opportunity to play and learn.
 - This does not add anything to your ‘to do list’, but these times can still be fun learning opportunities.
 - These are things that need to happen everyday and your child does not get to choose, so are not ‘child led’ in the same way as what was discussed earlier.
 - However they can still be opportunities for learning through play if you continue to ‘serve and return’.



Listen

for more ideas on how to make the everyday routine of getting dressed, an opportunity to play and have fun.



- Everyday routines include:
 - Having a meal
 - Having a bath
 - Getting dressed
 - Getting ready for bed
 - Going in the car
 - Going shopping

Ideas for play in routines:

- Bathtime - watch what your child is interested in. Copy them, e.g. if they splash, you splash.
- Mealtimes - get face to face with your child. Pause and watch what they are interested in and talk about that.
- Getting dressed - make funny 'mistakes,' e.g. socks on hands. See how your child responds.
- Read books together before bed.



Play with siblings

- Relationships with siblings are often the longest relationship your child will have in their life.
- Children can learn so much from their siblings, but sometimes it can be challenging to support them to play together well.

Ideas to support sibling play

- Activities where there is enough for everyone can be easier:
 - Bubbles, physical games outside, throwing a ball
 - Sensory play (playing with water, playdough)
- Children may need your support to begin with to learn how to play together.
- Praise your children when they are playing together well.



Listen

for more ideas on how to support siblings to play well together.



- Make sure there are enough similar toys for each child
 - E.g. a few toy cars that are a similar size.
- Make sure each of your children get one on one time with you regularly
 - This could link with the 15 minutes of focus talked about earlier.
 - Ways to fit this into your routine include time with an older child when a younger one naps, setting up an older child with some colouring while you play with a younger one.



- Be realistic with expectations
 - Of how long your children will play together, sometimes they may prefer to play alone
 - It can be helpful to each have some special toys that there is no expectation to share, like a special teddy.

Screen time

A note on screen time

- Children learn much more through play and interactions with the people around them than they do a screen, even educational programs.
- Lots of screen time has been associated with
 - decreased language and social skills
 - increased risk of being overweight.

Use less
Use together

Children learn better if they have long periods away from screens every day.

- Screens include TV, phones, Ipad, computer games.
- Even having a screen on in the background has been shown to be unhelpful for children's learning and it can distract you from interacting with your child.

What to do with screens

- Be careful about how much time your child spends in front of a screen
 - The Department of Health recommends children aged 2-5 watch less than 1 hour of screens per day.
- Watch age appropriate programs with your child and talking about what is happening.
 - This will help them more with language and social development than if they watch on their own.

Creating helpful habits

- Children copy what they see. Make sure you are not always on your phone.
- Turn on the radio or some music for background noise instead of the TV.
- Choose times of the day when no one uses screens, e.g. meal times, after dinner.



Ideas to do instead of screens – distract

- If your child finds it hard not having a screen, distract with something else they will enjoy.
- Spend time outside
- Read books together
- Provide other activities for your child when you need to do household chores
 - E.g. playing with blocks near you while you cook dinner.
- Encourage your child to be involved in everyday chores
 - E.g. shopping together and talking about what you are buying.

Watch!



Screens May Affect Your Child's Brain Development

© NBC News

Helpful links

- This is an excellent website with lots of information about areas of your child's development, including the importance of play and how to play with your child at different ages.
raisingchildren.net.au
- Here you can find playgroups in your area and lots of ideas of activities to do with your children.
www.playgroupnsw.org.au
- See the power of play and interaction with small children.
[Molly Wright: How every child can thrive by five | TED Talk](#)
- [Resources for Playgroups and Parents/Carers - Munch & Move \(nsw.gov.au\)](#)
- Resources to support online safety when using screens with children under 5.
[Children under 5 | eSafety Commissioner](#)
- [Children and parents talk about childcare and early learning](#)

References

- [Importance of play for babies & children | Raising Children Network](#)
- [What Makes Your Child “Tick”? Using Children’s Interests to Build Communication Skills \(hanen.org\)](#)
- [Why Interaction Matters - Part 2 - YouTube](#)
- [Serve and Return \(harvard.edu\) developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return](#)
- [Adult-led versus Child Initiated Play | PlayMore \(playmoreot.com\)](#)
- [How To Have The Best Parent Child Playtime \(Right Now\) | Lies About Parenting](#)
- [8 Tips to Encourage Play Between Siblings \(thegeniusofplay.org\)](#)
- [Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [Department of Health | 14. Inactivity and screen time](#)
- [Following your child's lead through play | Playgroup WA](#)
- [Toddlers play & learning | Raising Children Network](#)



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