

Play and development

Being a child's playmate is not a task to be done, but a gift of love to be shared. In this sharing both child and adult feel the healing qualities of play. Play is the kindest way of being together. To be a child's playmate is to not be afraid to touch with your heart as well as your hand.



The Importance of Original Play In Human Development

The necessity of Original Play in human development is explored in the following questions and answers by O. Fred Donaldson, Ph.D. This information also discusses the role that adults can take in this process of development. The use of the word "play" refers to Original Play.

Why is Original Play Important?

Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn. Play is the optimum learning relationship for a child. The best learners at whatever age or stage of development are those that are best prepared to handle change. As they explore their world, children's play presents them with the fundamental relationships with which they acquire the basic feelings, ideas and capacities to effectively absorb from and adapt to the ever-changing world around them for the rest of their lives.

What are the benefits of play in a child's life?

A child who has been allowed to develop play resources receives many enduring advantages. First, she develops a universal learning skill. Second, play maximizes her potential by developing her creativity and imagination. Third, her relationships with the world and others are based on loving-kindness. Fourth, play promotes joy, which is essential for self-esteem and health. Fifth, her learning process is self-sustained based as it is on her own natural love of learning and playful engagement with life. Sixth, play creates a basic trust in the world.

Emotional-Behavioral Benefits

- Reduces fear, anxiety, stress, irritability
- Creates joy, intimacy, self-esteem and mastery not based on other's loss of esteem
- Improves emotional flexibility and openness
- Increases calmness, resilience and adaptability and ability to deal with surprise and change
- Decreases tactile defensiveness

- Healing process for hurts

Social Benefits

- Enhances feelings of acceptance of difference
- Increases empathy, compassion, and sharing
- Creates options and choices
- Models relationships based on inclusion rather than exclusion
- Alternative to aggressor-victim model of relationships
- Decreases revenge and need for self defense
- Improves touch and nonverbal socialization skills
- Increases attention and attachment capacities

Bio-Physical Benefits

- Positive emotions increase the efficiency of immune, endocrine, and cardiovascular systems
- Decreases stress, fatigue, injury, and depression
- Increases range of motion, agility, coordination, balance, flexibility, vestibular and proprioceptive motion, and fine and gross motor exploration
- Integrates sensorimotor, kinesthetic and emotional responses

Cognitive Benefits

- Increases efficiency of brain function

How does play help build strong learning foundations?

Because later levels of learning are built upon earlier ones, it is critical that the earliest ones are allowed to become firm and extensive before a child moves or is pushed to the next. The qualities of spontaneity, wonder, creativity, imagination, and trust, are best developed in early childhood play. Adults know from experience that it is very difficult to re-learn these skills later in life. But if we allow adequate time for these early skills to become firmly established, the child will be better prepared to acquire the later more sophisticated skills. Most important in play, the learning process is self-sustained because the natural love of learning is preserved and strengthened. The power of play also enhances self-esteem and interpersonal relationships.

How does play promote healthy interpersonal relationships?

When peers become competitors rather than companions in the learning process, social relations are damaged. In healthy play peers are playmates, not competitors. Consequently, in play the skills of sharing and compassion are learned.

Does the importance of play and touch diminish later in a child's life?

No, the power of play as an approach to life and learning is important throughout life. Our sense of touch is always "on." Human beings understand loving best through touch.

Do special-needs children play differently from other children?

Experts often write that special-needs children can't or don't play like normally developing children. When they do they are talking about cultural play activities and games that are based on skills that differentiate and exclude children. This is not the play I am talking about in this discussion. All children can play. As a playmate I adapt the play to include whoever comes to play. It is not the child's special need or culture with which I play.

Why don't adults play with children?

We all know that "play is a child's business." We treat it, however, as though it were a child's "busy-ness." Playing with children may sound simple, but it isn't easy. It is difficult to resist putting pressure on a child to succeed or do something well or the right way, rather than allow them to just play with the task at hand. At other times we impose tasks that meet adult needs rather than those of the child. What was once our way of engaging with the world has with age become both trivial and fearful. To put it bluntly, adults are afraid of playing with children, afraid of being embarrassed, looking funny and childish, of not being professional, of hurting and being hurt, of being accused of inappropriate touch, of losing their jobs, of losing control, and simply not knowing how to play with children.

What is the adult's role in play?

The adult's role is critical, but it is neither as an idle bystander nor as an overbearing adult. I'm suggesting that adults take on the role of a true partner or playmate. Playing with a child is the easiest and most beneficial approach. In traditional play adults take certain prescribed roles such as coach, manager, teacher, director, parent, and referee in order to maintain safety. In all of these roles the adults are separate from the children.

I'm suggesting a new role for adults who model and create a safe playground. This is a fundamentally new role and relationship for adults to take. To be a playmate to a child requires a change of mind as well as practice in new ways of being. Instead of standing apart, an adult playmate is fully engaged in the play itself. It is the adult's love rather than their rules that create safety. Not often in education do we make explicit the importance of love. Again, it is love that creates the safety within which play happens.

What about touching children in a time when there is so much fear about touch?

We somehow have come to believe that in our efforts to stop bad touch, no touch is equal to good touch. But "no touch" is not "good touch" and it is also neglect. We must acknowledge that good touch is critically important to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of all children, regardless of culture or special needs. While many adults abstain from touch out of fear, other adults are creating models of bad touch, which are seen and modeled by children. No touch doesn't model good touch.

To feel untouchable is unhealthy and dangerous. Refusing to touch or play with children makes them feel rejected. Harsh aggressive touch does not express love regardless of

what we say. Our words do not heal the wounds from abusive touch. "This hurts me more than it does you" is simply not true.

Play touch is always kind touch. The adult's role is to model kind touch in a wide variety of situations even during times of frustration and conflict. The foundations of emotional, intellectual, and social well-being are laid in touch.

Isn't play naturally competitive? Doesn't competition help children better learn to compete in the adult world?

The play of which I am speaking isn't naturally competitive. In fact, it is the opposite-naturally cooperative. The basis of this play is kindness and belonging. In play, one's self-esteem is not based on the loss of others' esteem.

As a result of constant contesting adults suffer from what I call *cardiosclerosis*, or "hardening of the heart." Play heals this isolation and separation and helps humans deal with change and surprise without the need for either victimization or attack.

What are some basic principles to guide adult participation in children's play?

Children do not come with owner's manuals. I remember when I was young and the rules for crossing the street were: STOP, LOOK & LISTEN. These are good guidelines for adults as they begin to play with children. Too often adults talk too much. Instead of sharing in play we drown in a sea of words. In an effort to control we often instill fear and then try to teach. Remember we are joining children's play, not having them conform to our play.

There are many skills required to keep oneself and children safe in play. Many of these are physical abilities, others are emotional skills. But more important than the psycho-motor abilities is the courage to first, above all, to give and receive love.

- Stay in touch
- Be kind
- Include all children
- Be accessible
- Get down
- Be safe
- Be quiet
- Be patient
- Pay attention
- Wear appropriate clothes
- Use soft, gentle touch and voice
- You are the most important play equipment

Through our work in Original Play our mission is:

- To substitute play for contest in human relationships;
- To influence and change patterns of interaction from aggression, anger and

violence to kindness, caring and affection.

- To prepare adults and adolescents to function effectively as playmates for children.
- To educate individuals and the business community through workshops, training and courses on the importance of play.
- To create self-perpetuating playmate programs in education, business, child-care and health-care facilities.