



# The Importance of Play

## Activities for Children

Handout #13

Healthy Children, Strong Families, Caring Communities

Play is special for children. Not only is it fun, but it is also important for healthy development. It is their “work” and their way of learning about the world.

Through play, children try out new skills, explore their imagination and creativity, and develop relationships with other people in their lives. Play can be an especially powerful bonding time for you, as a parent or caregiver. Playtime with your child also brings out the best in you. The beauty of this learning and growing time is that the motivation for a young child to play is already there – it is enjoyable!

### How Adults Can Support Play

Parents and caregivers should provide a safe environment that offers a variety of play materials to meet the different developmental skill levels and support the creative interests of children. It is also important to maintain a structured daily routine that includes rest, meals/snacks, active play and quiet activities.

Select toys that meet the interests of children during different stages of growth and development. When introducing new toys to children, it is important to show them how to play with and care for the new items.

You may want to help initiate play activities and then play with the children when asked to join in the activity. Keep in mind that parents are their children’s first and favorite playmates. From the very beginning of your child’s life, she is engaging in play with you, whether following your face as you move it slowly from one side to the other, or listening to your voice as you sing to her during a diaper change. Children love it when you are “silly” with them in play, and learn social skills by modeling your behavior. Over the years, your children may have a lot of fun toys to play with, but they don’t compare to you!



### Stages of Play

Children’s behavior in play develops in stages. Play allows children to explore new things at their own pace, master physical agility, learn new skills and figure things out in their own way. During play with others, children learn leadership skills by directing the action or by following a leader.

The following are common stages of play:

- **Onlooker Behavior:** Watching what other children are doing, but not joining in the play
- **Solitary Play:** Playing alone without regard for others; being involved in independent activities like art or playing with blocks or other materials
- **Parallel Activity:** Playing near others but not interacting, even when using the same play materials
- **Associative Play:** Playing in small groups with no definite rules or assigned roles
- **Cooperative Play:** Deciding to work together to complete a building project or pretend play with assigned roles for all of the members of the group

## Safety Tips

Toys should be:

- Well made with no sharp parts, splinters or broken pieces
- Strong enough to hold the child's weight
- Non-toxic and lead-free
- Shatterproof and easily cleaned
- Non-electric
- Checked frequently for safety
- Out of children's reach if they have small parts
- Properly supervised by adults

## Learning to Share is a Process

Learning to share takes several years to master and consists of three stages of development:

- **First Stage:** Children think everything is "mine."
- **Second Stage:** Children discover that some things belong to others.
- **Third Stage:** Children know they can lend a toy and get it back. Children are more likely to share when they see their toy come back to them and when other children share with them.



Children and adults need to know their own possessions will be respected. Special toys and comfort items (like a blanket or stuffed toy) do not need to be shared. When children are tired or cranky, they may go back to the first stage of sharing.

Sharing also refers to playing or working together in a cooperative effort. Working with others on projects, sharing a meal, solving a problem or playing a group game are other ways to model this behavior.

## Infant Play

Adults should provide colorful, safe toys and a safe place for infants to exercise and move about. Babies learn to coordinate the muscle groups that later enable them to walk, run, read and write. Infants communicate with cries, sounds, body movements and facial expressions, so adults must learn to interpret these signals to meet the physical needs of infants. Adults should notice when infants are hungry, tired or over-stimulated with too many toys, people or activities.

Infants need to feel a tie to a special person or primary caregiver who makes them feel important, safe and secure. Soft voices and special games help them grow and develop. Dancing with an infant slowly and gently to music, singing or humming while giving any necessary head and body support, will help to establish trust and stimulate the brain.

Once infants are crawling, scooting and walking, games like "peek-a-boo" or crawling through a cardboard box tunnel add to the fun. Other favorites during this stage include shaking rattles, rolling a ball and picking up and dropping toys and objects from a highchair. All of these activities are ways to learn object permanence – the concept that people and objects exist even when out of sight. Additional activities include filling buckets or bowls with a variety of toys or objects. Dumping and filling, naming objects, reading books, repeating sounds and having mirrors available to point out parts of the body are some important activities that increase an infant's vocabulary and help develop confidence and self-assurance.

## Preschool Activities

At this stage of development, children enjoy making their own choices. They experiment with new materials and discover creative ways of using toys or recycled containers.

According to Janice Beaty in *Pre-school Appropriate Practices* (1992), preschool-age children learn manipulation, mastery and the meaning of objects. Manipulation is the process children use as they try figure out how different objects work and what they can do with them. Then, with some control over these objects, they progress to mastery and repeat actions as a way of practicing what they have learned. Children assign meaning to their play experiences when they can use materials in new and creative ways.

Children benefit from playing in the following areas:

- **Blocks** allow children to experiment with construction techniques while learning the vocabulary of spatial concepts like “inside,” “outside,” “next to” or “on top of.” In addition, blocks help children express ideas and feelings, interpret what they have observed and learn cooperation and planning.
- **Pretend Play** with housekeeping equipment, adult clothes and other materials, let children experience role-playing with their own family life or other people they encounter. With the right props, children can become firefighters, grocery clerks, truck drivers, postal workers, fast food clerks or any other roles they want to explore. Creativity flows as children express their feelings, imagination and ideas.
- **Art Materials** include a variety of paper, crayons, paint supplies, pens, scissors, markers, collage materials, tape, a hole punch, glue, glitter and any other items that allow children to explore, experience their five senses and enjoy the freedom of creativity.
- **Sensory Play** can include containers of water, sand, dirt, birdseed, rice, cornmeal, ground walnut shells or any other texture that encourages experimentation with volume, measurement and other math skills. Using measuring cups, buckets, water wheels, sifters, spoons and recycled containers, children can pour from one container to another. These activities stimulate a child’s sense of touch and are calming for children who need to relax or spend time alone.
- **Puzzles and Manipulatives** like small blocks, Legos®, stringing beads, pegs and pegboards on tabletops or on the floor encourage children to develop their creativity, math skills, small muscles and hand-eye coordination. Watch out for small pieces around younger children.
- **Music and Movement** can be encouraged with recorded music, musical instruments (made or purchased), songs, finger plays and other items such as scarves, ribbons or streamers. These activities offer a change of pace, an opportunity to express feelings, release tension and provide fun with vocabulary and nonsense words.
- **Cooking** provides an opportunity for children to experiment with science, math skills and measurement. It also encourages them to follow directions, build vocabulary and try new foods. Cooking gives children the opportunity to observe changes from heat, cold or the addition of liquids. Single portion recipes allow children to make their own snacks while developing their reading skills.
- **Books and Storytelling** offer a different world to children. Visits to the library during storytelling hour give children a chance to experience the magic of a performance by a storyteller, find books on their favorite subjects and discover new things they would like to explore.

## RECIPES FOR FUN

### Puff Paint

- 1 ½ cups shaving cream
- ¼ cup white glue
- Food color or liquid water color

Mix glue and shaving cream together in a bowl, until it looks like thick whipped cream. Divide into separate cups and add different colors to each one. Let the children apply it with paintbrushes, q-tips or spoons into piles or spread thin. Use cardboard or paper plates. Let it dry for 24 to 48 hours.



## School-Age Activities

School-age children need lots of physical activity after a structured school day. Organized sports, athletic activities, arts and crafts, along with opportunities for conversation with friends and caring adults, will help to build self-confidence and encourage social growth. School-age children may need these types of activities before they sit down for long periods to do homework.

The following are examples of activities enjoyed by school-age children:

- **Arts and Crafts** can include weaving, clay, masks, costumes, puppets, sewing, knitting, tie dying, jewelry making and other similar activities. Children may still enjoy the creativity of plain paper, markers, pens or paint to create items such as paper hats, mobiles, masks, gift-wrap or original artwork.
- **Games with Rules** can include dodge ball, "Red Light, Green Light," hopscotch, "Simon Says," soccer, tennis, softball or other favorite sports played outside. Indoor games may include playing cards and board games (checkers, chess, bingo, dominos, trivial pursuit and scrabble). Activities using paper and pencil such as dot-to-dot, crossword puzzles, tic-tac-toe or even Pictionary, can challenge the mind and build self-esteem.
- **Clubs and Field Trips** can include children in one age group or mixed age groups. Clubs can include organized groups like scouts, 4-H or informal ones. Field trips to parks, the beach, a hospital, fire station, farm, post office, and radio or TV stations expose children to the natural environment and the community.

## RECIPES FOR FUN

### Playdough

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup salt
- 4 teaspoons cream of tartar
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 cups water with food color or liquid watercolor

Mix all ingredients in a non-stick pan over medium heat until it pulls away from the sides of the pan. Turn out on wax paper. Knead when cool enough to handle.

## Resources

Child Action Inc.'s Resource Library has a variety of resource materials available to assist parents and child care providers. Call 916/369-0191 for more information.

### Books

- *Before the Basics* by Bev Bos
- *Hands around the World* by Susan Milord
- *Games to Play with Toddlers* by Jackie Silberg
- *The Curiosity Club* by Allene Roberts

### Videos

- *Before and After School . . . Creative Experiences*
- *Learning through Play*
- *The Creative Curriculum* (Spanish)
- *Space to Grow* (Spanish & Chinese)
- *New Games for Child Care Settings* (Spanish)

### Creative Websites

The following websites promote creative play with ideas for activities you can do at home with children of all ages using a wide range of creative materials:

- Public Broadcasting Service's educational website for kids:  
[www.pbs.org/wholechild/parents/play.html](http://www.pbs.org/wholechild/parents/play.html)
- Science toys and experiments you can make with your kids:  
[www.scitoys.com](http://www.scitoys.com)
- San Francisco Symphony Kids website on music appreciation especially for kids:  
[www.sfskids.org](http://www.sfskids.org)
- Art, science, architecture, history, ethnic studies, puzzles, games, activities and much more, just for kids:  
[www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/home.htm](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/home.htm)