



Ahead of the game: Why play is the key to children's future success

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Children are geared to find play opportunities in almost any circumstances. Their play experiences can be enriched for optimal benefit through the following:

- **Responsive adult engagement.** Responsive play begins at birth in the form of serve and return interactions. Serve and return is focused, two-way communication where one player 'serves' - using cues such as sounds, smiles and gestures - and the other person responds in the same way, thus 'returning the serve'. Babies serve as well as return and both parties are equally interested in each other. Adults should slow down and spend time simply 'being' with the child in order to notice their cues. Simple games such as peekaboo, nursery rhymes or songs/waiata can be incorporated.
- **Continuing to follow children's leads** as they get older. Adult participation that acknowledges and builds on toddlers' own play fosters more creative play than adult direction. Children allowed to freely explore toys by themselves find more functions and imaginative ways to use them than children who are shown how a toy works.
- Creative and engaging play is possible with **inexpensive toys and everyday objects** such as blocks, balls, pots and pans, pencils and paper. 'Loose parts' with no obvious play direction such as crates and boxes, and natural objects like pine cones and branches, stimulate children's intrinsic motivation to play and explore. Old clothes and household objects can be props for imaginative play. Opportunities can be found in everyday activities such as baking. Having lots of toys is unnecessary with fewer toys promoting longer and better-quality play with each item.
- Children should be given plenty of opportunities for **unstructured play and exploration**, along with more structured activities. Structured, rule-based play such as ball games or Simon Says are especially helpful for focusing attention and working towards a set goal. Unstructured or free play is particularly important for creativity and imagination, autonomy and self-confidence. A mix of solitary and social play should be encouraged.
- **Verbal play** should be incorporated for language development. Babies benefit from 'parentese', which uses real words said slowly, with shorter phrases and a higher pitch. Adults can repeat and expand on what toddlers say and ask older children to tell or write their own stories or act them out. Books, songs, legends or prayer/karakia can be used.
- Indoor activities (including screen time) should be balanced with **outdoor play**. Outdoor play can include elements of risky or adventurous play, which is physically challenging without being dangerous or reckless.
- **Educational forms of digital play** should be chosen for preschoolers and interactive ones prioritised for older children. Passive screen time should be avoided in children under two and adults should join in with children of all ages wherever possible.

This is an excerpt from our evidence brief on the importance of play for children's development. To read the full brief, visit informedfutures.org/play