The foundations for lifelong success are laid down in the early years of life. An ideal way to support children’s brain growth and the acquisition of key cognitive skills is through play.

Play has a fundamental role in children’s wider development and improves social and emotional skills, physical skills, and family wellbeing.

Play is a key vehicle for learning. It sets children up for educational achievement by developing the cognitive skills needed for school readiness, making learning a fun experience, and by directly enhancing early literacy and numeracy.

High-quality play can be achieved with everyday objects, natural resources, and responsive adult engagement beginning at birth. Two main types of play, structured and unstructured, have different and complementary benefits for children’s development.

Changes in family lifestyles, the wider environment and society are threatening children’s ability to play. These include less access to safe outdoor spaces, and high living costs and associated demands on parents. We therefore recommend:

At the family and whānau level:
- It is essential that play is valued as a key way to develop and succeed.
- Families should be reassured that play is an ideal way to help their children learn, high-quality play involves both structured and unstructured activity and a wide range of inexpensive play opportunities exist.
- Caregivers should be advised that time spent actively and warmly engaging with children in play has a direct and positive impact on development. Three areas of social policy have the potential to greatly assist whānau with this:
  1. Improvements to paid parental leave would give caregivers the opportunity to stay home with their children or work fewer hours to have more time and energy for play.
  2. Better access to mental health treatment and support would assist affected parents to bond and actively engage with their children.
  3. Increasing home ownership rates would allow families to settle in an area and build community bonds.

Outside the home:
- The high costs of early childhood education must be addressed.
- It is vital New Zealand schools and early childhood centres retain a focus on play in their curricula.
- Policy makers should ensure play opportunities are not compromised in higher-density housing areas. Community-based play initiatives must receive support to continue their valuable work.

To read our full evidence brief on the importance of play for children’s development, visit informedfutures.org/play