

Growing Kids God's Way - Appendix 2 - Let Them Play

A little voice down the hall engages in a one-way conversation. "Now girls, look at Mommy's face and pay attention. We're going to the store and the two of you need to obey Mommy with a happy heart," says three-year-old Ashley to her favorite dolls. Seldom do we stop and think about the importance of imaginative play. Yet in the life of children, it is a natural thing. In fact, having varied forms of play is one of the strongest indicators of healthy emotional growth and a significant component of a child's orderly development. Play is not simply a time when a child amuses himself. With all the pressure these days to educate young children early (even starting in utero), parents can take heart. One of the most active forms of learning is play.

In *Preparation for the Toddler Years* we introduced our readers to the learning mechanism of curiosity and the role it plays in a toddler's learning ability. There we defined curiosity as a natural stimulus, a child's birthright—a survival mechanism. It is the key that unlocks the treasures of knowledge and opens a world of discovery for young children. Curiosity serves the child as a necessary precursor to the advanced skills of logic and reason.

While curiosity draws a child to an object, a second force holds him there. That force is attention. Attention is what holds a child in the moment of exploration, whether it is ten seconds or ten minutes. Attention is the power of attraction. Attraction is the result of sensory nerves working together, holding a child's interest to an object. It could be the color of a magazine, a shiny new pen, the odd-shaped lamp, or the musical ring of your cell phone. Color, shine, shape, and sound—all are in need of investigation. Curiosity, attention, and attraction all lead to investigation, which brings to the young child the excitement of discovery and learning.

Remember when your toddler was sitting on the rug eagerly engaged in playing with a toy? As a toddler he was not limited by rules and regulations, starting or ending points of formal play. He played with the object as long as he wished, until he became interested in something new. He often manipulated his toy with his hands, pushing and pulling, pounding and banging, even attempting to test and taste the surface with small bites. The developing brain was working, processing, reinforcing, and gaining usable sensations. This is all part of a toddler's learning mechanism. In the process of investigative play, your toddler derived as much enjoyment from the stimulation of his senses and motor capacities as he did from the toy itself.

But as your child approaches three years of age, an even more powerful force comes into being. This force, your child's imagination, will cause you to marvel at its limitless possibilities. This natural endowment is a function of play as much as it is a function of higher learning. Whether this is accomplished through imaginative friends or educational toys, it is part of a child's world, play and imagination.

Behold the wonders of your child's imagination! Evan rushes to park his bike on the front walk, grabs the coiled rope hanging off the back, and dashes for the front door. "Fire!

Hurry! Spray the flames!” he shouts breathlessly, aiming the rope’s end at the porch. Then circling back to the garage for assistance, he reaches for a make-believe axe to chop open an invisible door. One slightly amused black Labrador lifting her head for a second, curiously looks on. She’s seen similar antics a million times before.

At three years of age, make-believe and other imaginative activities begin to occupy an important place in the child’s mental world. Imagination will do what curiosity cannot. It will carry a child beyond the boundaries of time and space. It can take him to places he has never been. He can move mountains with his imagination and test his own feelings without fear of reprisal. Through the imaginative process, a child gives life to inanimate objects, while assuming a controlling role as chief operator of his own play.

In *On Becoming Toddlerwise* we shared the story of two-year-old R. J. and the Tommy Train he received for his birthday. At this age, R. J. showed only curious interest in the Tommy Train box cars and engine. He touched the tracks, spun the wheels, and even tried to stack the cars. But he did not understand how to play with a train.

At three years of age, the train set came out again and curiosity gave way to R. J.’s developing imagination. Now a more dominant cognitive process began to rule R. J.’s thinking. Now he plays the role of engineer. His mind constructs mountainous terrains out of pillows, wobbly bridges from a shoe box, and special tunnels through the legs of a chair. Train sounds begin to accompany each circle of the track as the train became real in R. J.’s mind. Big changes took place in one year. The same will happen with your child.

There is more! Your child’s imagination is facilitated by another significant facet of a child’s life, and that is play. Sometimes your child’s imagination can interfere with your reality. Perhaps you casually remove the stuffed brown monkey from the kitchen counter only to learn you’ve inadvertently cut short the show he is performing for an audience of one. Now someone besides the monkey is decidedly unhappy. Other times, and this is the good stuff, your child’s imagination enhances your reality. In other words, Mom should take advantage of the child’s imagination to achieve some healthy goals. Like when the lumps of steamed broccoli become foot soldiers preparing to march off to war against the formidable flu germ enemy causing his cold. Get clever, make his imagination work for you.

Play, whether a child does it by himself, in a small group, or with Mom at the park, is one of the most underestimated and often misunderstood components of a child’s healthy, developing cognitive world. Play creates learning opportunities and experiences that uniquely connect a child to his world, which otherwise could not be obtained. Through play, a child is first introduced to problem solving techniques, development of moral and social skills, improved motor coordination, logic, reasoning, and strategy. Plus, play has educational value and provides therapeutic benefits. Play complements and reinforces gender identification and encourages appropriate risk-taking.

Overall, play is the single most important means by which a child connects with his world

and the people around him. Think of play as the hub on a wagon wheel. Moving from the center outward, spokes connect to the outer rim of life and learning. Play generates multiple activities that go into shaping the child, reinforcing values and stimulating learning. Everything about play accents a child's understanding of his world. From right and wrong to parental expectations, play reveals in a public way how a child thinks, reasons, and applies concepts learned the day before. Through his imaginative play, he mimics actions, traits, and social expectations by becoming another person and in this way he gains the experience of self-confidence necessary for proper socialization. By denying a child opportunity to play, a parent is in grave danger of collapsing the bridge connecting a child's discovery, knowledge, and experience to learning.

The Benefits Of Play

Play is your child's tutor. It goes far beyond simply encouraging learning activities. Through attraction, it becomes a means by which a child stretches himself beyond his present circumstances. He takes chances. When you think about it, play often contains an element of risk. There is some risk involved when a child ventures out on his first steps without the aid of Mom or Dad. There is risk involved when a child shares a new toy with a visiting friend or for the first time, reaches out to pet the neighbor's puppy. There is risk involved when a child stands on a stage reciting a single line in the Thanksgiving play. He takes risks whenever the group's activities call for running, jumping, and bumping. There is risk associated with being picked on a team or not picked at all. In this sense, play motivates a child to step beyond the present to a new level of experience.

Play also has important educational value. During playtime a child picks up, manipulates, and studies toys of all types. He learns shapes, colors, sizes, and textures and how parts of object fit the whole of the object. His mobility allows the development of life through the games he plays and the contact he makes with others. In time a child learns to formulate plans, develop strategies, and exercise his assessment skills in problem-solving because of play.

Developing socialization skills is one of the corollary affects of education. Through play, children learn that their personal gratification often depends on the cooperation of other children. Play teaches children about partnership, teamwork, and fair play. It is through play that a child's primitive understanding about "rules" is reinforced, because most games have rules. Interestingly, while the home environment may be more forgiving or patient with the bending of the game rules, it is quickly apparent to your child that his playmates are far less tolerant of a rule being violated. He quickly learns that he must "follow the rules" or be at the mercy of his peer group.

Play is also therapeutic both physically and emotionally. Physical play releases the pent-up energy stored during times of sitting still. That is why recess time at the school yard is so noisy and fun-filled. The children are released to play with others. Physical play is a pressure valve allowing for the release of energy. In the preschool years, play must have some outside activity that has a physical dimension attached. Swinging, chasing after the dog, marching in Dumbo's imaginary parade, hide-and-seek, or any activity that can get

their little hearts pumping, growing legs moving, and developing minds stimulated provides therapeutic benefits.

Imaginative, emotional play is freeing to your child. Such play allows him to test his desires, fears, and hopes without the risk and hardships of judgments and boundaries associated with reality. He is able to think outside the boundaries of logic, reason, and reality. He is able to manage and direct ideas that only he understands and he does it in fragmented ways. He can take a big box and a blanket, make it become first Davy Crockett's fort, then a service station for his trucks, followed by a broadcast booth like the one he saw yesterday on television at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. In any event, the child is in control of something he can control and should control. Children need to be able to control some things. Parents too often err in allowing these "things" to be Mom and Dad instead of the events of imaginative play.

A child's imagination leads to other forms of play. Children mimic. Have you notice that? In our opening example, three-year-old Ashley recounted what she knew about going to the store with Mom and let her imagination direct her play toward her dolls. Obviously, she had an impression from her life that she transferred into her make-believe world. Thus both imitation and imagination work hand in hand.

The value of such play is worth noting. It not only stimulates a child's thinking, but also reflects what he is learning and how he is learning it. The next time you overhear your child's one-way conversation, listen carefully to the tone of voice used. For better or for worse, you might hear your own. Another aspect of play is the element of repetition. Much more is taking place in a child's's play than what appears on the surface. Repetition gives the child the chance to consolidate skills needed to solve board games and puzzles, to stack blocks or connect Hot Wheels racing tracks. Even though your child appears to be doing the same thing over and over again, his activities are leading somewhere. For example, a four-year-old may have mastered elementary motor skills necessary for running and dodging a ball. Repetitious play advances him to the next level of skill called 'anticipation', where movements are predicated not as a response to the person throwing the ball, but to the anticipated throw itself. Here again, strategy, thinking, and reasoning skills merge to bring the reward of success. Success and accomplishment reinforce the cycles of learning.

Anticipation is not limited to the realm of physical movement, but extends also to imaginative activity. To have expectations based on the belief of what will happen tomorrow, a child must be able to imagine. Imagining what will happen next, good or bad, is part of the thinking exercise of our humanity. Parents give little consideration to the fact that if a child is in any way deprived of imaginative emotional play, either through discouragement or the lack of freedom at self-play, he will equally be deprived of what it is to know hope. For hope itself is not only a measure of the imagination transcending time and space, but of our very humanity. It all comes back to the importance of play.

Play also contains the element of construction. Man by nature is a builder. The Jewish Old

Testament gives an account of a man named Nimrod, called “the builder of cities” (Genesis 10:6–12). In fact, he built eight mighty cities by which he established his kingdom. One component of play common among children worldwide is the construction component. Children are builders and their efforts reflect the knowledge of our day. With their amazing imaginations, they construct buildings, boats, spaceships, mountains, overpasses, and tunnels. They use blocks, sticks, paper, and grass. They erect tall buildings out of discarded oatmeal boxes and bridges out of spare Lincoln Logs. Complete with sound effects, little boys move massive amounts of soil with their powerful diesel trucks, which may be nothing more than a thick piece of tree bark. Little girls also use construction in their play, but tend to make finer and more delicate objects such as doll clothes and paper dolls. They set up beautiful tea parties and arrange their neat little house with a few empty cardboard boxes, a folding chair, and a spare blanket. They love Grandma’s old dresses and play endless hours as beautiful princesses or fancily dressed ladies right out of old Victorian neighborhoods.

It is through the medium of play that a child first develops his sense of fairness and cooperation. It is in play that moral strengths and weaknesses show up. How your child moves the board game pieces, scores his game, follows the rules, and shares with others reflects his developing moral identity. The child that sulks because he didn’t get his own way or bullies, manipulates, or quits a game because he is not winning reveals much about a child’s underdeveloped sense of fairness, sharing, cooperation, and justice. Play not only reveals moral strengths and weakness, but in the right or wrong environments, it can encourage both.

Such moral attitudes, healthy and not-so-healthy, develop early and are continually reinforced by moral lessons taught throughout the day. Lessons in right and wrong and consideration for others drive a child’s social experience. Children do not like bullies and quitters, but they enjoy children who know how to play by the rules and are willing to share. Your child’s moral sense creates either a positive, rewarding, and affirming response from other children or rejection. Most socialized play will always have a moral component. How well prepared is your child?

Play Has Limits

Does play have limits? Yes, several. Play has developmental, emotional, intellectual, and moral limits.

Play Has Developmental Limits

The technical word among clinicians for developmental limitations is ‘maturation.’ Before certain types of play can be attempted, a child must demonstrate a level of maturity that includes the readiness of the mind and necessary motor skills to participate. If a child lacks basic eye-hand coordination, he is not ready for T-ball any more than he is ready for an international Ping-Pong competition. But there is more to consider. Significant yet often elusive complements of physical readiness are the mental activities associated with play. These include a child’s level of interest, his willingness to take chances, his self-confidence in play, his ability to overcome fearful anticipation of play, and the ability to handle defeat

or victory that comes from play.

Also, the personal satisfaction derived from being able to do something well is an important influence on a child's development of "self." This was not a concern for your two-year-old, but it will be a concern for your four-year-old. If a child is rushed into any type of physical play that leaves him continually on the short end of victory because of his lack of readiness skills, he tends to back away from other good avenues of play that can lead him to competency in other areas of his life. When a child begins to shun games that test his skills because of a pattern of failure, he tends to form defensive strategies that carry into other areas of endeavor including school, friendships, and his own sense of self-worth. A child who holds dearly to the belief that "I cannot" because of repeated failures often translates this belief later in life to "I will not even try because I will fail." Be careful not to push your child prematurely into organized play activities prior to his readiness.

Play Has Emotional Limits

"My four-year-old falls apart if he does not win!" This statement usually signals that a child is playing a game beyond his emotional readiness. Do not push your children into games or types of play for which they are not emotionally ready. Some games are too emotionally challenging for children. Your four-year-old should not be playing the marble-dice board game, 'Aggravation' (by Milton-Bradley/Hasbro). The repetitive range of emotions experienced from excitement and anticipation of victory to a sudden loss of all your marbles (literally and figuratively) and imminent defeat are far too many emotional ups and downs for a young child to handle. We are not saying that your child should avoid games that challenge his emotions and test his limits. We are saying it is wise to avoid games that are developmentally beyond his emotional limitations. If your child is routinely falling apart emotionally, the games he is playing are beyond his age-readiness. This often happens when children are playing games with their older siblings that are designed for that sibling's age. Going to bed with tears and a sense of defeat does not make for sweet dreams for your little darling.

Play Has Intellectual Limits

Because of differences in cognitive skill levels and childhood interests, children need to participate in types of play that fit their intellectual needs and abilities and can challenge their thinking without crushing their spirit. Pushing a child into a game before he is intellectually ready does not serve the child well. No matter how insistent your four-year-old might be, or how well he can "wheel and deal" with you, do not entertain the idea that he is ready for a game of "Monopoly" (Parker Brothers, 1935). He is simply not ready for the type of competition, the skill level, or the logic of buying and selling Pennsylvania Avenue property. Nor is he able to comprehend underlying meanings or sustain his own interest through the length of time it takes to finish the game. This will only lead to unnecessary four-year-old frustration tantrums.

Play Has Moral Limits

Children from the earliest days of memory face the impact of moral decisions and obligations made on their behalf and by themselves. From the time they were able to first

understand language, they were reminded what is good, bad, approved, or naughty. The idea of what they are obligated to do or not do, how to behave or not behave, is fairly imbedded in daily thought and expected conduct. Therefore, any type of play that undermines or is antagonistic to your family's moral values should be avoided. Any type of play that weakens your child's developing conscience undermines the fullness of his public character. Any type of play that interferes with basic respect for parents, property, and other people must be discouraged.

When you compromise the moral aspect of play, all sorts of bad things can happen to your child's mental world, from poor self-esteem to poor play habits. In time, this leads to weakened friendships and shunning from other kids. On and on the downward spiral goes when lines of moral play including fairness, sharing, and following the rules are crossed. The best prevention that parents can provide when it comes to play is stressing to their children that it must be "play by the rules" or "do not play at all."

Play Has Gender Limits

Every grandma knows that if you put a toy car, ball, stick, doll, blanket, and dishes in a room, little boys immediately gravitate toward the car, ball, and stick while little girls drift to the doll, blanket, and dishes. It really does not matter where a child is from, whether it be a complex society like ours or a simple tribal setting in the rain forest, little boys have a trail of masculine adjectives that distinctly separate them from little girls. Social conditioning? There might be some, but not sufficient enough to alter male and female predispositions embedded in nature's endowment of gender. The fact is, male and female brains are wired differently. Yes, little boys love trucks and little girls love dolls. We bring this up as encouragement and as a warning. When it comes to play, parents should not attempt to gender-neutralize their little boys or girls, but rather appreciate the differences and work with each propensity. A delightful example of this was demonstrated by Dr. George Lazarus, an associate clinical professor of pediatrics at New York City's Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. He recounted a mother sensitive to gender-neutrality who gave her daughter several toy trucks only to find her daughter later tucking them into bed.

Understanding gender difference helps parents make proper evaluations about their child's progress both in play and life. It helps avoid speculative evaluations. For example, when a mother says, "But his sister was talking at his age," she is making a comparison in language development. But research confirms that girls tend to have a verbal advantage over boys early on. They speak sooner and more comprehensively by three years of age than their male counterparts who arrive at the same level of competency around age four-and-a-half years.

Yet, boys have other strengths including aptitudes for math skills and completing calculations in their heads sooner than girls. Even the construction of their building blocks demonstrates gender predispositions, or lack of, toward engineering tendencies. Boys are also wired for action. That might be one reason they are always on the go, while their sisters are content to sit and play with their dolls or be entertained in a single location.

This is why play is so very different for each.

Finally, notice how little boys play together compared to how little girls play. Girls are more relational and will work together to accomplish a common goal. Boys however, are far more likely to try and do things “on their own.” Of course, any wife understands this truth. Just think through the times you may have offered directions to your husband only to hear, “I know where I’m going,” as he starts again to make a wrong turn.

Summary

It is almost startling to realize just how important play is to a child’s emotional, moral, and social development. Play is not simply an activity that a child wants to absorb himself in; it is a necessary framework for understanding his world. As we have seen previously, play involves many facets and connects children to life in many ways.

However, this too can be taken to an extreme with the old adage, “if a little is good, more must be better.” Play is not an isolated experience in a child’s life, but only one significant component surrounded by other aspects of learning. Not all education comes in the form of play. A child will learn from playing with a toy, but more importantly, he must develop specific skills that he can only gain at the hands of Mom and Dad. Sitting, focusing, and concentrating skills are not play, but they are necessary aspects for life. Following instructions and being kind, fair, and honest will be used in play, but are not necessarily learned there. The learning process of these skills starts with Mom and Dad’s acute awareness that a three-year-old heart is in need of training to think about the feelings of others first.