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Power of Play

by: Amy R. Rossano, MA, OTR/L

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Outcomes:

After this course, participants will be able to:

- Describe at least 3 benefits of play in young children.
- Identify at least 4 types of play.
- Describe at least 3 stages of play.

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What is play?



- Play is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and personally directed.
- Play is activity by children that is guided more by imagination than by fixed rules.
- Play is the spontaneous activity of children.
- Young children learn best through play that is relevant and meaningful to their life!

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The opposite of *play* is work

Common societal myths about learning and play:

- Learning must be work.
- Learning occurs during adult-directed activities.
- Play is frivolous, purposeless activity.
- Play is what children do when they aren't learning.
- Play skills come naturally to children.
- Children benefit most from educational toys.
- High-tech toys are important for young children.
- Academics should be emphasized as early as possible.

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Benefits of Play

- It is very important to understand and respect the importance of play in a young child's development and be able to convey this information to families and caregivers.
- Many adults view play as trivial, simple, meaningless behavior that is used only to busy children so grown-up activities can occur (eg. cook dinner, clean, work on the computer, laundry, etc.).
- The research challenges adults to "recognize play for what it is- a serious behavior that has a powerful influence on learning." – Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988

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What are the benefits of play?

- Play is essential for healthy brain development.
- Play sparks creativity and curiosity.
- Play is critical for expanding cognitive, language, social-emotional, and motor skills.
- Play is relevant and meaningful to the child.
- Play facilitates productive and appropriate social interaction with peers and adults.
- Play experiences provide learning opportunities.
- Play helps children gain a better understanding of the world around them.
- Through play, children learn how to learn.
- Play enhances problem solving skills.
- Play is intrinsically motivating.
- Play enhances a child's ability to concentrate.

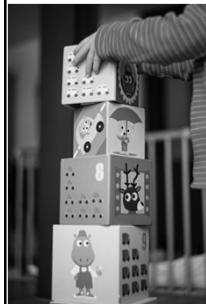


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What are the benefits of play?



- Play helps children learn to deal with frustration.
- Play fosters spontaneity and independence.
- Through play, children discover, interact, absorb, experience, create, explore, and learn.
- Play allows young children the opportunity to practice new skills.
- Play provides children with opportunities to make choices.
- Play provides sensory rich experiences.
- Play fosters self-esteem.
- Play is fun ☺.

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Neuroscience and Play



What are the connections between brain development and play during the early years?

- All healthy young mammals play
- The complexity of play quickly increases as neurons hardwire connections at a rapid rate.
- The early games and frivolity equip young children for the skills they will need later in life.
- Play is essential for healthy development.

▪ -Joe Frost, 1998

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According to Piaget (1972)

- Play can serve many purposes, and since children learn more effectively through activity rather than direct instruction, play provides an excellent vehicle for learning.



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Types of Play

- Active play vs. Passive entertainment
- Child-directed play vs. Adult-directed play
- Free play vs. Structured play
- Object play vs. Social play

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Active Play vs. Passive Entertainment

- When a child is actively engaged in an activity, he is integrating his senses. The child is seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, tasting, and getting proprioceptive, and/or vestibular input.
- During passive entertainment, the child observes as something interesting happens.



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Examples:

- In active play, a child connects the track and then pushes toy trains around it.
- In passive entertainment, a child watches a battery operated train go around the track.
- In active play, a child learns to propel self on a tricycle or other ride-on toy.
- In passive entertainment, a child rides on a battery powered ride-on toy (Power Wheels).

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Child-Directed Play vs. Adult-Directed Play

- Child-directed play means following the child's lead by playing with things of interest to the child.
- Adult-directed play means the activity has been planned by the adult, is initiated by the adult, and the ending point is determined by the adult. This often looks more like direct instruction which is the polar opposite of free play.
- "Child-directed activities are usually relevant and authentic for children. If children introduce and remain engaged in an activity, it is likely that they are motivated to do so because the activity is relevant, meaningful, and reinforcing to them. Furthermore when children are motivated and interested in a given activity, maintaining involvement does not require the use of primary or artificial rewards." – Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004

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Free Play vs. Structured Play

- Free Play is child-directed with no direction or constraints placed by adults. It is beneficial to assess a young child's play skills during free play making note of:
 - Ability to initiate play
 - Interest (or lack of) in a wide variety of toys
 - Appropriate play with toys
 - Attention and time on task
 - Problem solving skills
 - Desire to share toys with caregivers

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Free Play vs. Structured Play

- Structured Play is referring to either adult-guided play or adult-directed play.
- While neuro-typical children learn through free play, children with special needs often require more structure and guidance.
- Many children have limited play skills. Some children need special support in order to reap the benefits of learning through play.
- It is through structured play time that we can facilitate development. We coach teachers and educators about how to provide support during play time.

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Object Play vs. Social Play

- Object Play refers to how children play with toys.
- Social Play refers to how children play with other people.
- There are 6 stages of Object Play--

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Object Play

Stage 1: Random and Exploratory Play

- This emerges soon after birth as babies reach and grasp- first for familiar people, then objects and toys.
- Babies engage in this type of play using their senses while discovering and exploring the physical environment around them.
- Involves repetitive motor movements: mouthing, shaking, banging, or batting at toys.
- Activity is done for the physical sensation it creates.

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Object Play

Stage 2: Cause and Effect Play

- Emerges around age 9 months / or when child sits independently
- Activity is done because child has discovered he can control the outcome through his actions
- Child plays purposefully with objects in an intended repetitive manner- then repeats the action because he remembers the pattern. It is predictable.
- Child learns that he/she can manipulate his/her world.
- Playing with cause and effect toys gives young children the feeling of control and allows children to predict and anticipate what will happen next.

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Object Play

Stage 3: Purposeful/ Functional Play



- Emerges around ages 15-18 months
- Child uses objects the way they are intended to be used. Examples are brushes hair with brush, pushes cars, rolls ball, and stacks blocks.
- Child also demonstrates understanding of related objects. Examples are drives train on the track, puts doll in baby crib, plays with toy food at the toy kitchen set, and throws only balls in the basketball hoop.
- During later Functional Play, the child will be able to respond appropriately to directives. (Example: "show me what you wear on your feet" (child gets the shoe), "what do we sleep on?" (child points to a picture of a bed in a book)

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Object Play

Stage 4: Representation/Symbolic Play

- Emerges around age 3
- Child begins to use symbolism in play. This is the beginning of pretend play.
- Symbolic Play has greater cognitive demands than functional play with real objects.
- Symbolic play is engaging in pretend activities out of context which means the child must rely on past experiences and memories.

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Object Play

Stage 5: Constructive Play

- Emerges around age 4
- Child manipulates objects for the purpose of constructing or creating something specific.
- Facilitates gross and fine motor skill development.
- Examples: creating with play-dough, wooden blocks, sidewalk chalk, Lego's, etc..

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Object Play

Stage 6: Imaginative/Themed Play



- Emerges around age 4-5
- Play is based on past events and typically involves sequencing of steps
- Child pretends to be someone or do something- takes on different roles
- Examples: doctor kits, play restaurant, dress up clothes, play store

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Social Play

Stage 1: Play with adults

- Often times, young children choose to interact or play with adults instead of by themselves or with peers
- We gain valuable information observing a child playing with his parents/caregivers
- We need to be aware of what kind of play is occurring Is it child-directed, adult-guided or is it adult-directed?
- It is our job to coach families about the importance of child-directed play

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Social Play

Stage 2: Solitary / Independent Play Skills

- Solitary Play is when the child is able to entertain himself/herself
- Child possesses some independent play skills
- Child is able to initiate play without direction from adult
- All children need to be able to entertain themselves for at least short periods of time

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Social Play

Stage 3: Spectator Play

- Child watches as other children play
- Does not join in or interact with peers
- Child shows interest in what peers are doing
- Precedes parallel play

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Social Play

Stage 4: Parallel Play Skills

- Child plays near another child/children but is not interactive- this indicates that children can co-exist
- Most 2 year olds have parallel play skills
- It is important to note if child is interested in what other children are doing
- When problems with sharing emerge, it is the beginning of associative play!

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Social Play

Stage 5: Associative Play Skills

- Children are engaged in one activity with some interaction, but each child ultimately does his own thing
- There is no formal organization, group direction, group interaction or definite goal
- Associative play skills signifies the emergence of social interaction skills and this takes time!
- Proximity leads to interaction: think about this when setting up the environment in the classroom (we structure the environment)

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Social Play

Stage 6: Cooperative Play skills

- Children work together toward some common outcome or goal
- This means they are communicating with each other and planning the steps necessary to reach their intended goal
- This is the beginning of compromise and conflict resolution

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Toys, toys, toys! Top 10 criteria for choosing a good toy



1. Look for toys that encourage active play instead of passive entertainment
2. Choose simple toys that can be used in a variety of ways
3. Select toys that are safe and durable
4. Select toys that are interesting to your child, but expose him/her to new toys as well
5. Choose toys that can be easily manipulated
6. Look for toys that allow the child to learn naturally through exploration and encourage problem solving
7. Select toys that spark the child's imagination
8. Choose toys that are interesting to the adult too so that cross generational play can be fostered

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The more the child has to use his own mind and body during playtime, the more he will benefit from play.

- Play is essential for healthy development. During the first years of life it is playful activity, not direct instruction.. That makes a positive difference in brain development. Nash, 1997
- Play is the most natural way for children to learn. Even children with special needs should be developing their skills through play-based activities. Skills should not be taught using therapeutic tasks but rather during functional activities that naturally occur during the day.
- Identify each child's top 5 motivators and use them to create a reason for the child to engage with others. Follow the child's lead and he/she will be more responsive.
- We strive to build a connection with the child before we begin placing demands on him/her in therapy.
- Successful play is about the relationship. During play, it is never about the toy and always about the relationship that is fostered during the play exchange.

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What happens during a successful play exchange?

- Adult recognizes and acknowledges interest of child
- Adult follows the child's lead
- Adult forms an emotional connection with the child
- Adult builds on the child's interests to enhance development

- The relationship comes first, then enhance development.
The relationship building with the child and family is so important!

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Becoming a sensitive play partner

- We should provide learning opportunities without pressure and be a sensitive play partner.
- What makes a play partner sensitive? By responding appropriately to the child's interests, pace, emotions, language level, and sensory needs in a pressure-free manner.
- We need to encourage caregivers to avoid asking so many questions and giving so many directives during playtime.
- Keep playtime natural!

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How do we keep playtime natural?

- Engage young children we work with in activities that typically developing children would enjoy
- Interact and play with the children as we would our own nieces and nephews.
- Therapy time should be fun, engaging, light-hearted, and not stressful.
- Avoid unrealistic expectations for attention and time on task—especially for toddlers!



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Become an intentional play partner

- Therapists and teachers are not just “good with kids”... we do what we do, on purpose – with intention
- We: play with a purpose, talk with a purpose, sing with a purpose, read with a purpose, snack with a purpose, play outside with a purpose
- We must recognize and appreciate that play is a reflection of development

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Quality of Play

- Play is a reflection of development.
- Positive play experiences lead to children having increased play competence which leads to the child having increased confidence.
- Play is central to the development of good physical and mental health.
- Play affects all areas of development. Strong play skills enhance development, and weak or limited play skills inhibit development.

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The effect of disabilities on play skills

- While play comes naturally to most children, many of the kids we work with may need to be taught specific play skills before they can begin to reap the benefits of learning through play.
- We need to assess a child's play skills throughout the therapy process to address appropriate play goals.
- We no longer look at what is age-appropriate play but rather what is developmentally appropriate play.

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Interruptions in Play

- “Well-timed questions can encourage children to think, problem solve, try a different approach, incorporate symbolic materials or develop new play schemes. Poorly timed questioning can turn children off to the play all together. It’s an interruption. It stops the flow of play.” —Gronlund 2010

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Facilitating learning through play

- Encourage families to nourish play time by being a playmate or a play partner as opposed to a teacher or director.
- Remind families that play is a process, a journey, an experience- and that the end result is not relevant. It is the process, not the product that matters.
- Adults need to learn how to seize the moments and opportunities that occur during play time that allow children to discover and learn in context.

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Natural activities to promote development in the home

- While toys are important to the play process, it is also possible to play with common household items.
- How can we turn empty containers into toys?
- Egg carton, tissue box, paper towel roll, laundry basket, roll of tape are some examples of household items for “fill and dump”, stacking, and more

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Activities in the kitchen: examples...

- Making instant pudding
- Sorting fruit loops by color
- Sorting dry noodles by shape
- Sensory play with cooked spaghetti
- Painting with pudding
- Refrigerator magnet play
- Stacking empty containers
- Drawing in salt
- Stringing fruit loops
- Play dough birthday cake with candles



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More activities in the kitchen

- Matching lids to containers
- Making goop (cornstarch and water) or making play dough
- Sensory tubs with beans, lentils, or rice
- Making special shaped sandwiches using cookie cutters
- Sorting with muffin tin liners
- Wiping the table, sweeping the floor
- Making fruit-filled ice cubes
- Paper cup stacking and much more....

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Facilitating learning through play:

- Get down on the floor and play with the child
- Give attention to what the child is doing
- Follow the child's lead instead of directing the play
- Avoid asking too many questions during play time (don't constantly quiz the child)
- Play face to face with the child
- Provide opportunities without pressure
- Be playful and animated- play like a kid! A successful play partner makes learning fun!

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Facilitating learning through play

- Be a fun, sensitive, and intentional play partner
- Allow for messes: the mess is half the fun!
- Show the child how to play with toys in different ways
- Hold desired items next to your face to encourage the child to look at you when you talk.
- Watch, listen, and encourage the play but don't take over
- Encourage the child to use 2 hands during playtime (come to midline, crossing midline)
- Remember, play time is more about the relationship than about the toy.



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I am a young child



- I am not built to sit still, to keep my hands to myself, take turns, be patient, stand in line, or be quiet.
 - I need motion, I need novelty, I need adventure, I need to engage the world with my whole body
 - Let me play... Trust me, I am learning!
- Author- unknown

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Questions?

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