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## Play

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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# play



Cooperative Extension Service  
South Dakota State University  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

# play

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Extension human development specialist

To you it looks just as it always does—a living room, a bedroom, the back yard.

Of course it's incredibly messy—there's a child in it, and the toys are scattered all over.

To the child it's no ordinary room or yard. It's a fairyland court complete with princess, a construction site (**you** would have said demolition site), a farmstead with all its animals, an airplane cockpit.

The child is at play, and it's involving him totally.\*

Your chairs that are rearranged into the pilot's console, the stacks of blocks that are a building, all the other things that are dragged out and spread about are absolutely important. Wails of protest will erupt if you choose the wrong time to intrude.

## What toys do

Playthings, whatever they may be, are as important to a child's growth and development as textbooks will be when he goes to school. Children use toys to make some sense of their world. Toys help them understand what is happening to and around them.

☆ Toys give a child a chance to be "boss" over some part of his environment. For once, he is in charge; he pushes things around. He is in control.

☆ Toys introduce a child to the world of choice.

We know that the ability to choose between alternatives

determines "success" in the adult world.

It is just as important in a child's world, and it prepares him for the complex alternatives he will face as he grows up. "What will I play with today?" becomes "What career will I choose?" tomorrow.

☆ Toys inject novelty into the child's life. They show that learning and problem solving can be fun.

☆ Toys aid physical development, all the way from crawling after a rattle to mastering the dribble and hook shot under the basketball hoop.

☆ Toys are an outlet for expression. The expression can be verbal—crooning to a stuffed animal—and physical—banging on pot lids with a spoon. Working off negative feelings by scolding the animal or setting up a thundering din on the lids is as necessary and important as expressing happier feelings.

☆ Toys provide for social contacts. Mark learns to include Mary in his make-believe, and they learn that playing together can be as much fun as playing by themselves. Billy learns to give up his favorite car—for a while, while Tom learns to be just a little more assertive.

Most children will work things out together, without too much interference from you.

☆ Toys develop hobbies and suggest careers. Of course the child doesn't think of this, but you know a person with a lifelong devotion to photography that started with a discarded box camera. There's at least one veterinarian who still cherishes memories of his first toy rabbit.

## 'Realistic' or 'unstructured?'

Toys provide the opportunity for two activities which only seem to be opposite: (1) practicing adult rational behavior, and (2) exploring the secret imagination.

For emotional health in the adult world, we must balance these two activities against each other. The modern adult must have well trained skills and must be imaginative and creative in their use. Sometimes he must rely on personal creativity during leisure hours to cope with work hours which may be routine or repetitious.

The best toys to achieve a blend of rational and imaginative behavior depend on a child's particular stage of development (which may or may not be linked to his chronological age).

When children are attempting to gain control over their world, they are helped best by realistic toys. A toy lawnmower can be pushed, a sand bucket filled, and there's a sense of accomplishment as well as an improvement in muscle coordination.

When they have gained some control, then unstructured toys become best, because the imagination is now ready to develop. Remember the different things a big empty box was to you—your cave, a mountain, a racing car?

At any time, the child may jump between realistic and unstructured toys. The tiny car of an older child may have to mimic the lifesize model, right down to the decal and license plates. Or he may hang on to a

\*It is simply less awkward to say "him."

favorite toy for years after you think he ought to have outgrown it. You can't second-guess children, but they **will** grow up, and all too soon.

### Why children play

Children play because it is fun. It's fun to feel the wood in a set of building blocks, to stack them high, to knock them down again.

They also play because they want to be like their parents. A child "irons" like the adult does, "scrubs" the floor or "hammers" with the same concentration he's seen in an adult. These children are "playing" the roles of the most important people in their lives, their parents.

Children play because they are curious. They want to learn. And learning does take place, even in a puddle or while carefully, one-by-one, removing the contents of a purse.

Concerned parents may not approve of some of this play, but they should remember the child is learning, even if it's only how mud feels between his toes.

And sometimes children are merely curious about the limits of your patience.

### How you can help

Children have to play alone much of the time, but it's nice to know you are near. Sometimes they need a gentle push, or the stage set, for them to get started. Even in the world of play, adult involvement is important.

Children who play regularly with their parents and others are more likely to achieve the highest levels of creativity as adults. Older people open the doors of a child's imagination, because the secret to imagination lies in having materials and time to try out new ideas. You can provide those things and arrange the time.

To make play more meaningful for your child you can:

☆ **Read everything you can about child development.** Try to

learn the stages of physical and mental and emotional development, the child's capabilities at each stage, and what different toys and play equipment fit these stages.

And then don't be surprised if the child rejects the "perfect" toy and turns to some grubby item he chose. Let him be him.

☆ **Play along at times.** Leave him alone at others. Take a genuine interest in your youngster's play. He wants to be noticed, and to have you near and approving. But encourage him to play alone, so he's prepared for those times when it's necessary.

☆ **Don't force.** The "experts" may say children of a certain age ought to be playing ball, but if your Bobby or Betty hasn't the muscle coordination, then don't push the child into failure. The experts simply didn't check out Bobby and Betty. They'll catch up.

☆ **Overlook the first clumsiness or mess,** particularly when the activity is something new. If he doesn't know how to do it yet or is making a mess, be patient. And even if he is acquainted with the toys he shouldn't be yanked away without warning.

Of course, you often must set some limits, or you may want to steer him to a less frustrating activity. Try to give a time warning, and make it positive. "Put your toys away in 5 minutes, Kenny, so we can go outside."

☆ **Provide a place for toy storage.** A corner of the child's bedroom equipped with some storage shelves and boxes may be just the place to store toys. Get him in the habit of taking care of his possessions, because he needs to learn how to organize things.

You and he can find pictures of toys to tape on the shelves or boxes. This will help him put the toys in the right places.

☆ **Provide variety.** In a week or a day, he should have a combination of quiet play, active play, creative play, group play, and make-believe.

☆ **Give a few strongly built**

**toys** rather than a lot of cheap, poorly made ones. Think how short your temper will be if you have to hunt all over town for an exact replacement for a shoddy toy your child loved deeply but which fell apart from too much love.

Well built toys are also apt to be safer for the child.

That doesn't mean you have to spend a lot of money. Nearly every child enjoys playing with cardboard boxes, old clothes, and your serving spoons.

When he tires of a toy, take it away for a while before he really comes to hate it, and provide one or two others.

☆ **Give a chance to play with other children.** Every child needs other children, no matter how creative the single play or how loving the adult.

The closer children are in age, the more they will benefit from group experiences, but if the children in the neighborhood are older or younger, you should still introduce them to each other and give them an opportunity to work it out.

Form a neighborhood playgroup to encourage social experiences; that also gives you a chance to meet other people and may give you some free time.

☆ **Encourage make-believe.** Provide some old envelopes for your "mailcarrier." Give the "gorilla" a banana. A child needs an imagination now to fill his hours and his life and later to give him creativity in his adult life.

☆ **Don't show him "how to"** especially in drawing or painting, if you expect him to develop creative ability. Instead, help him to see the object for himself and put his own thoughts on the paper.

The best response to a child bringing a still wet painting or a strange abstract all in blue is, "Tell me about your picture," rather than "What is **that** supposed to be?"

### Toys that discriminate

Can boys play with dolls?  
Should you give a girl a basketball?

We hear the arguments that providing children with toys which are traditionally associated with their own sex helps makes girls less active, less adventuresome, less inquiring, and less creative. And we hear it robs boys of opportunities to be loving.

What matters most is that everyone, including children, has the opportunity to develop his or her talents. It matters less that a child is male or female than that he or she is an individual.

Give children equal access to whatever they want to play with and don't load them with guilt if they pick something that makes you uncomfortable. Lots of opportunities now will prepare the child to cope with the variety of situations that come in later life, which is what the world of play is all about.

### Toys for different ages

A toy is only useful to a youngster if he is the right age for it. So it's important to know what a child can **do** (therefore, what toys he needs and likes) at each stage of growth.

### The new baby

The newborn infant doesn't use toys.

His eyes don't focus too well, he can't identify sounds, and he has no control over his hands, arms, legs, or head. He really isn't interested in anything except food, sleep, and comfort.

### Three months to one year

Babies 3 and 4 months old like soft, bright colored toys that they can learn to hold, drop, and pick up again. These toys provide exercise and interest.

Growing babies like toys that are chewable, especially during teething. Musical toys that have gentle sounds help the baby learn to identify sounds and the directions they come from.

When babies are almost a year old, they have started to move around. They need

encouragement to creep and take their first steps.

### Toddlers

The toddler needs all the practice he can get in moving. Exercise is good for the big muscles in his arms and legs. And he is very curious. He rattles, shakes, opens, and shuts things. He likes to empty and fill pails and build block houses. He needs **action** toys.

Toys should be large, lightweight, and very simple. The child does not need complicated "parent-appeal" toys. Choose safe toys—always.

### At ages 3 and 4

The preschool child can really get around—he zips, jumps, throws balls, and runs fast. He loves **action** toys.

He begins to handle things, and uses his fingers to pick them up and put them right where he wants them. He likes to draw. The child of this age likes make-believe play.

### The child of 5

The child at 5 likes all the things he did at 4, but he does them more completely and with greater ease. His play becomes more complicated. Now's the time for toys to do things with instead of toys he winds up and watches.

Creative play is a new challenge to him every day. Once he has mastered one thing, he wants to go on to the next, more difficult skill.

Dramatic play is serious and very important. This is the age of day dreaming and complicated pretending. He is outgoing, and simple toys that help make fun out of social play are appealing.

### The 6-year-old

The step from 5 to 6 is tremendous. A whole new world opens—the world of school with teachers and new friends. He is in constant competition. Action,

creative, dramatic, and social toys—all the toys in the world—are useful to him.

### Ages 7 and 8

In these years the kinds of toys needed are the same. The quality must be different. Toys must be more detailed and more elaborate.

### The years 9 to 12

"Toy" is a word children this age may not appreciate. They want to be grownups.

The interests of the child are wider and he needs the material to provide a balanced diet of active, creative, dramatic, and social play.

You are the center of the child's life, but after you comes play. Make it meaningful for him. Observing children while they play and thinking about some of the purposes of play will help you help them.

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