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Listening, learning, and living together: it's the science of life.

The Importance of Play¹

Suzanna Smith²

Adults who watch children at play may think of it as having fun, goofing off or letting off, energy. Yet play is actually how children learn and is essential to their healthy cognitive, social, and physical development.

Play stimulates every aspect of a child's development. Motor skills such as walking, kicking, or skipping are strengthened by sliding and running, by jumping rope, or playing ball. Children develop their fine motor skills and eye hand coordination with art work such as finger painting and coloring.

They build their thinking skills with games that require strategy and planning to reach a goal, making choices, or solving problems, such as board games, puzzles, and models. Even making mud pies teaches children about measuring and mixing.

Playing with other children also helps youngsters develop social and interpersonal skills as they take turns, share their toys, and work as a team. Plus, they have the added benefit of the sheer joy of being with a friend. Play helps children develop confidence as they learn new things. What parent can forget a child's look of pride as she or he finally masters a task?

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2. Suzanna Smith, associate professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, University of Florida, and Executive Producer, Family Album Radio, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Playing with your child can also build your relationship as you both enjoy each other's company and have fun together. As adults, we often forget that we, too, still have permission to play. Play is what childhood is about, so give children reasonable freedom to explore, provide interesting playthings and play together often.

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