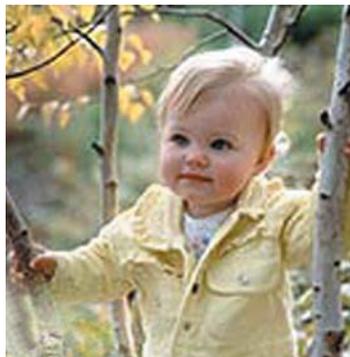


Parent Magazine

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Parents expect the preschool experience to be one where children are actively learning and are often disappointed to find, when they visit, that the children are "just playing." But that is exactly the point. Young children (and even older children!) learn through play. This learning takes place in many different ways.

On the simplest level, young children are still learning to use their bodies. When they play with table toys or other small objects, when they paint, color, cut, or "write," they are exercising the muscles of the hand, preparing them for the "fine motor skills" they will be needing throughout their lives. Young children's "doodling" is preparation for writing. They are learning to control the way they hold a pencil and to control what they are producing. Writing, working with puzzles, building with interlocking building toys, stringing beads, making collages, and other such activities also help children in developing a related skill -- hand-eye coordination, having the hand do what the eye wants it to do. This skill, too, is only developing in preschoolers



This is why most young children cannot yet color "inside the lines" of a pre printed picture and why they cannot be expected to do so. The skill need to do this is one which they are only developing. Parents sometimes think that the projects their preschool children bring home are "just scribbles" and are disappointed that they are not prettier or neater. But these "scribbles" are the necessary preparation for later control.

Outdoor play is, of course, also very important. Children need to run, climb, jump, skip so that they develop in the "gross motor" as well as in the "fine motor" area.

Other toys or games help develop other important skills, such as the ability to sort, distinguish shapes, establish

the sequence of events, hone memory and other cognitive skills.

If you feel that your child is lagging in any of these skills, be sure to discuss it with his or her teacher. Chances are, you will be reassured that everything is perfectly normal. If both you and the teacher feel that your child needs additional help, the teacher can help you access this help

There are subtler advantages to play as well. When children play with other children, they are learning how to get along in the world. They learn that they need to share, that they need to take turns, that they may need to negotiate to get what they want. They learn, in the context of playing games, that in life there are rules which must be followed. Fantasy play, "make believe," helps children explore their world and understand it. When a child is playing, he is trying to figure out the world around him or her. Children can express feelings and emotions more easily through play than in words. We all know that listening to children at play can teach us a lot about a child.

It is very important that parents, too, take time to play with their children. From cooing, cuddling, and talking to an infant to playing a game with an older child, the time parents spend only with their children, not distracted by other tasks, is a special one. When we play with children, we must allow ourselves to be led by them. We must be willing, for a short while, to think like a child. We must allow ourselves to laugh with them freely. Laughter not only reduces tension, it also creates closeness between people. It can help create a bond that lasts a lifetime. Play helps develop positive, enjoyable communication between children and their parents, and the positive effects of this last throughout the children's school years and beyond.