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The value of play

For pre-schoolers, everything they do is learning. Adding fun to the doing and learning will make even the tedious seem like a game. The more your child plays and does, the more opportunities they have for finding favourites. Imagine if you will, what would have happened if Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's family had never set him on a piano bench and placed his little hands on the keys? Nothing. What a loss that would have been for the world. One of your most important jobs as a parent is to find out what natural talents lie within your child.

When a child is born, they have over a hundred billion brain cells. Through play, trillions of synapses develop connecting these hundred billion cells in the brain. Each time your pre-schooler plays a game, listens to music or stories from picture books and interacts with you, new synapses develop and the child's intellect is enhanced. Play, although it sounds simple, must be taken seriously. Play is your child's work!

Physically, a pre-schooler develops well-balanced, fine and gross-motor skills during recreation. Toys are not just for fun. It is no accident that down through history, in all cultures, toys are a part of early childhood. Games with equipment teach the learner how to manipulate and like the old adage says, 'practice makes perfect'. Mother Goose rhymes, musical games and dancing about is play with rhythm and rhyme that orchestrates balance, coordination and grace.

Emotionally, play is therapeutic. Since play is a natural medium for self-expression, it provides the pre-schooler with a safe space to experience, express and celebrate feelings. In play, the child is given the opportunity to 'play' out their accumulated feelings of tension, frustration, insecurity, aggression, fear, bewilderment, confusion. The more difficult and less obvious advantage of play is that it allows a child a place to learn how to handle anger and aggression. Although this is a long process, expressing turmoil openly in socially acceptable ways is vital for a child's emotional well-being. As a bonus, through play, children develop a sense of humour and an ability to show empathy to others. Emotionally speaking, play is vital to mental health and stability. Playing in play groups gives pre-schoolers the opportunity to learn social skills: sharing, taking turns and cooperation. Patterns of behaviour, acceptable ways to interact and ways of playing safely are also part of this whole socialisation process.

Creativity is a tremendous gift with which human beings are born. Unfortunately, instead of being nurtured, often imaginations are stifled. As parents and caregivers of young children, we must remember: in fantasy play, children are given a stage on which they can spotlight their creative nature. Children imagine whole scenarios and assimilate their learning through fanciful make-believe. Symbolic play, in which toys and dolls are used, allows children an opportunity to practise every possible social situation. They can rehearse all the different roles and experience being whatever they choose. This exploratory play and experience with others is a prerequisite for the child to accomplish a positive self-image. It is through fantasy play that youngsters develop their sense of humour, practise empathy and celebrate compassion.

Everyone senses on some level that the ability to be spontaneous and to play is a basic need and an important characteristic of healthy human beings. However, not everyone can channel this force for ultimate health and happiness. Unfortunately, learning to play is something we must do as children; if we do not learn how to play as a youngster, often it is a skill that cannot be learned as an adult. As parents and caregivers of young children, I urge you to teach your child how to use her brain, body, emotions and imagination as vehicles for celebrating her higher self. When you teach your child to play, you are showing them the path of intellectual, social and emotional transformation – a path which ultimately leads to self-actualisation!



Fingers 'n' thumbs



Fine motor development



Contemplate

During the preschool years, children will master many complicated fine motor skills needed for their independence. At this age, children develop both the muscular control and the concentration needed to use precise finger and hand movements. Your preschooler's spatial awareness is developing too, so they will be able to set up detailed play settings with miniature plastic people, build towers of bricks, put together jigsaw puzzles with five or more large pieces and draw pictures of people with three to six body parts.

With your child's growing independence will come a strong desire and need for refined eye-hand coordination. Three-year-olds often want to do everything for themselves. Even if it takes a long time and the child becomes frustrated, a three-year-old needs practice performing self-care tasks like brushing teeth, getting dressed and undressed, eating etc. As youngsters learn to feed themselves and drink from cups and glasses, they will probably make big messes. Be patient – the only way they will learn is to practice. The games in this chapter offer ways to help three-year-olds practice some fine-motor skills. Keep in mind that abilities vary widely with preschoolers. In the coming year, your child will learn some of the following to a certain degree, but he may not master each one.



Fine motor milestones: Three years

- ◆ Will learn to unzip a zipper
- ◆ Will learn to use fingers with control as in finger painting designs
- ◆ Will learn how to trace basic shapes (circle, square, triangle)
- ◆ Will learn how to use blunt child-sized scissors
- ◆ Will learn how to use a glue stick
- ◆ Will draw people with three to six body parts
- ◆ Will learn to colour in areas of a picture
- ◆ Will learn how to use eating utensils
- ◆ Will learn how to eat foods like ice-cream cones
- ◆ Will learn how to pour liquid from a jug
- ◆ Will learn to string large wooden beads onto a shoelace
- ◆ Will learn to use some simple kitchen utensils
- ◆ Will learn how to make balls and cubes with clay

