

VIP Value In Parenting

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Play: The Work Of Children

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As the school year comes to a close, and summer is just around the corner, play is in the air! Whether visiting a neighborhood park or walking along a beach, children can be seen busy with their favorite activity... play. Because children are more interested in playing than in anything else, it is not unusual for parents, teachers or caregivers to feel impatient, or even angry, when children dawdle, turn everything into a game, or ignore time limits and chores because they are "busy playing." Actually, play is *serious business for children*, and can be truly thought of as their "work."

Why is play so important?

Psychologists and many educators recognize play as being important in several ways. First, play can be considered as the way in which children learn about the cultural and moral values of society. (When playing at the beach, is it okay to take Jennifer's shovel away from her without asking?) Play also provides an opportunity for children to release the tension and frustration that they experience as they learn to behave in a grown-up world.

What role should parents play?

According to Jennifer Birkmayer, Senior Extension Associate in the Dept. of Human Development at Cornell University, "One of the ten things all children need is to be engaged in developmentally appropriate play with other children and adults." Parents and caregivers can help create a quality play environment for their children. Finding enough space for play, both indoors and out, and allowing children time for uninterrupted play are two important ways parents can help children with "their work." By providing supervision to be sure that children remain safe, and "props" which expand on creative play, parents can stay involved without taking over or telling their child *how* or *what* to play. Expensive toys are not necessary, and may even restrict a child's imagination. Play with water, sand, blocks, balls, dolls, and simple household objects is often more creative and productive than elaborate toys or games "as seen on TV." Pretend, or make believe, is an important type of play for young children. Most children will use their imaginations freely if too many toys or rules do not control their play.

Play for all ages

Of course, children of different ages have different play needs. This is based upon their age, interests and stage of development. Six year old Brian might think football is the greatest game while Jeff, also 6, isn't yet coordinated enough to catch the ball; he likes to collect bugs. Try to understand the unique interests of each child and plan things they will especially enjoy. *Developmentally appropriate activities* help children learn and are lots of fun. If children are too challenged by play it will frustrate them and make them feel sad or angry.

Playing with babies

The new research on brain development makes it clear that babies need to be stimulated by all senses. Holding, singing, snuggling and playing "peek-a-boo" are all important to an infant's development, and are what they like best! With each new play experience, another connection is made in your baby's brain. Each repetition of the stimulation makes the connection stronger. You'll probably notice that your baby watches and tastes everything. This is how they are exploring their world. Give your baby:

- ◆ Soft, cuddly toys to feel,
- ◆ rattles that make noise and teething rings they can taste.
- ◆ Hang toys for them to look at in their crib and
- ◆ place big pictures at their eye level.

Simple steps for becoming involved in children's play activities

- 1) **Observe your child at play** to see what their interests may be and how they choose to use their toys and "props."
- 2) **Assist them with their planning** by offering ways in which they can expand or elaborate their play (offer them paper bags to take with them when they "go to the store").
- 3) **Participate in their play if invited**, but allow them to initiate the activity and determine your role. Respect their decision to play alone.
- 4) **Allow them ample time** and warn them shortly before the play period will end.
- 5) **Relax and have fun with your children!!**

Older babies love pots, spoons, and empty boxes to put things in and take things out. There's no need to spend money on fancy toys for babies. **Safety tip!** To make sure that a toy is not too small, have an empty film container on hand. If the toy fits inside, or has a small part that could come loose, it is not safe for baby!

Playing with toddlers presents challenges and excitement!

The toys they had through infancy now have different uses. Blocks once teethered and carried around may now be used to build a house. Your toddler may take a doll and pretend to feed it, imitating you. The ability to *make believe* is a very important step in your child's learning. A child who can make believe is able to see objects as symbols. This learning will help the child in the development

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of a later symbolic activity – reading. Toddlers want to try all kinds of new activities as they master their little bodies and are always two steps ahead of you, so safety is a constant issue. Everyday objects are what toddlers like best, including “dress up” clothes, and props to “play house.” Even a trip to the backyard becomes an adventure with a toddler!

Play becomes more social with pre-schoolers

At this age, parents become more observers than participants. Keep in mind that things children learn for themselves are the things those children best remember. Play at this age develops social skills, as children work together and share ideas. Research shows that children with good play skills tend to be responsive to learning in school. Remember that children still need supervision to play safely. Imitation of others makes up a large part of pre-school play time; be sure to model appropriate behavior.

Play is still important for school-age children

While children are spending more time in school and engaged in organized activities, free play should also be encouraged. Select and provide play activities that will help develop children’s skills and self-confidence. Simple games and puzzles, sewing materials, kites and construction sets are ideal for this age group. Television, computer and video games influence a child’s play by implanting ideas. They have also been linked with the growing rate of childhood obesity. Try to monitor the amount of time your child is “plugged in.” Summer is the perfect time to encourage outdoor play, and is healthy, too!

Sharing books – A joy for all ages

Reading and sharing books can be one of the most pleasant and memorable play experiences your children will have, and can start when your child is an infant! Sharing books with children and helping them to develop sound and letter recognition are important steps in reading readiness. Even though many children at age six or seven are reading on their own, being read to is still encouraged. Never think you have to stop reading to your child because of their age or grade level.

ITS NOT TOO EARLY TO THINK ABOUT SUMMER CAMP

Call the Child Care Council of Orange County for a free informative guide to summer camps and recreational programs in our locale – 294-4012, ext. 24/25.

FREE OR LOW-COST HEALTH INSURANCE IS AVAILABLE!

Call Maternal-Infant Services Network, 1-800-453-4666 for information about children’s health insurance or prenatal care.

Summertime is Vacation & Travel Time!

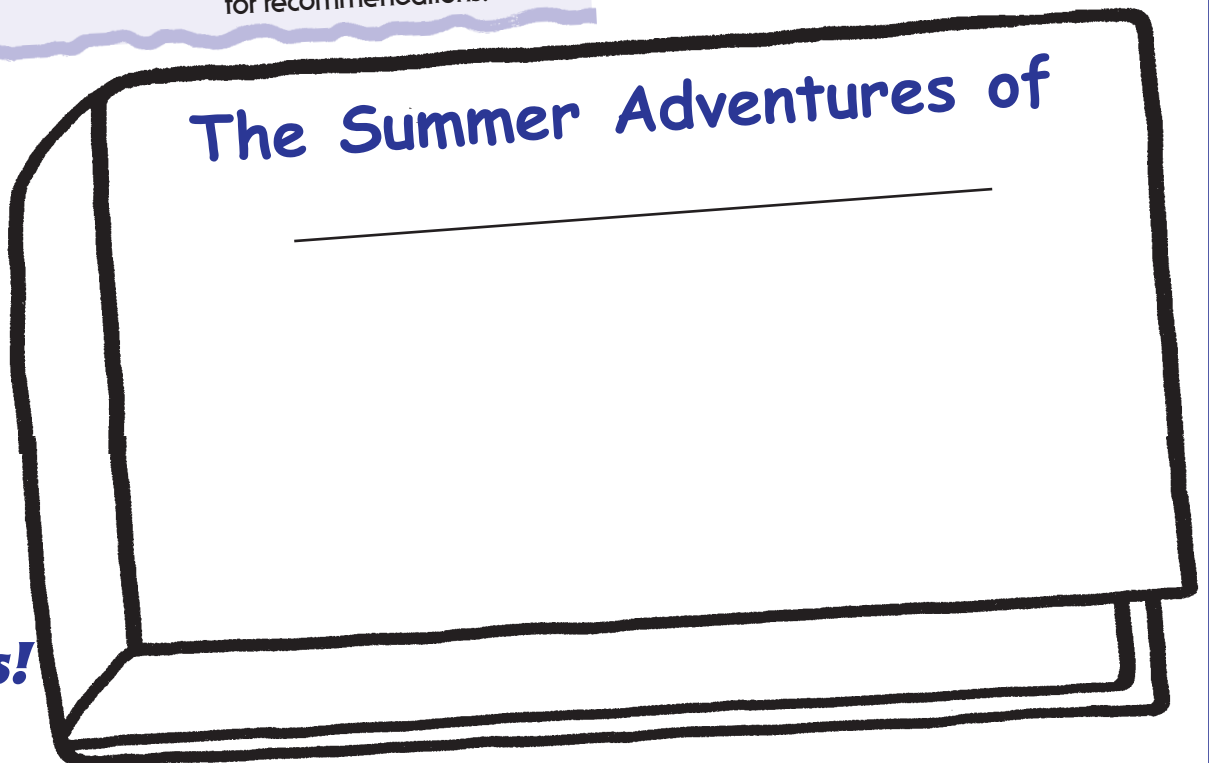
Be prepared for outings – have a bag ready and filled with:

- ◆ Cool drinks (water is best)
- ◆ Snacks (nutritious – cheese, crackers, fruit)
- ◆ Crayons and paper
- ◆ Blanket for warmth (and picnics!)
- ◆ Storybooks (bring some props to go along with the story!)
- ◆ Playing cards
- ◆ Wet-wipes
- ◆ Ball to toss or kick
- ◆ Favorite cuddly (in case fresh air prompts a nap)
- ◆ Sunscreen and/or appropriate cover from the sun. Check with your MD for recommendations.

PLAY SAFE!

- ◆ Always check the toys’ label for appropriate age level.
- ◆ Check for sharp edges. Brittle plastic and/or glass can break easily.
- ◆ Watch for toys with small parts that can be swallowed easily.
- ◆ Some toys produce noises loud enough to cause damage to a child’s hearing.
- ◆ Don’t allow young children to be around pools or any water areas unsupervised.
- ◆ Flying toys can easily injure children – adult supervision (outside) is best.
- ◆ Electric toys should be checked for damage, and directions should be followed carefully.

Draw a book cover about your summer adventures!



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For more information on parenting education and/or the Orange County Parenting Coalition, contact Cornell Cooperative Extension at 914 - 344 - 1234. www.cce.cornell.edu/orange



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