



Learning Through Play

As toddlers begin to develop and amaze you with their ability to learn, it can become very tempting to start imposing formal teaching, videos, flashcards and memorization rather than allowing them to learn through play. Continue to trust however, that at this age, play really does equal learning and watch your child's brain flourish!

We know that play = learning

We know from over 40 years of research that play = learning. When children have choices, and are encouraged to follow their interests and have fun, learning takes place best.

Parents often don't trust that play = learning

When it comes to play, parents know what to do, but can't always bring themselves to do it. Sometimes it feels like when children are playing, they are wasting valuable moments that could be spent learning.

Play is connected to children's learning, more so than direct instruction

- When children learn something from experiencing it, they learn it faster and more meaningfully.
- When children are instructed to believe that there is only one right answer, or to use only memory, they don't learn how to learn, or that learning can be fun and rewarding.

Learning in context is "real" learning and play is the best teacher

- Play allows children to try out everything with no real life consequences (you can be the "bad guy" without getting in trouble, or the mommy, or the baby).
- Memorizing isn't necessarily real learning (just because your child can count to 10 doesn't mean they understand math as much as the child who helps with sorting laundry by counting the towels).

Play promotes skills (for example, better attention, problem solving, perseverance, social development).

- You want your child to love to learn, not to freeze when they don't know the right answer.

Play helps kids develop self-regulation

- Make-believe play (pretend play) is especially good for children’s self-regulation, because it helps kids practice self-restraint and to voluntarily follow social rules (for example, not hitting, throwing things on the floor, making a mess without cleaning up, etc.).
- By the end of the preschool years, well-regulated children can wait for a turn, resist taking something from another child, share, clean up, help another child or adult with a task, and stick with something they find challenging.

How parents can make learning through play possible

- Provide options. Almost anything can be a toy. Use blankets and chairs to make forts and tents. Use plastic containers with dry rice and beans to make music.
- Get rid of toys that can only be played with one way. Lots of popular toys with batteries fit this category.

Reading and language

- Play I-spy
- Read nursery rhyme pictures, stories
- Play with blocks
- Pretend play

Math

- Sort laundry
- Cooking
- Play I-spy using spatial relationships (for example, on top of, under, in front of, and behind)
- Learning opportunities are everywhere you look. Just as you can find rectangles in buildings and hexagons in stop signs, numbers appear everywhere. When we divide our cookie evenly or make sure there’s enough fruit for everyone at the table we are doing math. When we ask our child to set one napkin for every person at the table, we are using “one-to-one correspondence.”
- Explore with a magnifying glass
- Play with blocks

Social/Emotional

- Go on field trips
- Read books
- Pretend play (learning empathy, emotions, rules, sharing)
- Scaffold your child's knowledge by adding that bit of extra support
- Participate in your child's pretend play. Demonstrations, suggestions, turn taking, and joint involvement is particularly developing advanced make believe play.

Cognitive

- Go on field trips (real or imagined) and make up stories together
- Paint on an easel: Learn cause and effect by watching paint dry, mixing colors together, painting with water
- Play board games
- Play color matching games
- Be a color detective and a shape detective
- Play I-spy (letters, numbers, colors, etc.)
- Cook together: It is a fun way to learn about measuring, counting, timing
- Bean bag color toss (using coffee cans or buckets and colored bean bags) – also good for fine motor skills

Gross and Fine Motor

- Gross motor skills: large movements like crawling, running or jumping
 - ride-on toys, climbing wall, walking hills, stairs, balls
- Fine motor skills: small muscle movements like using a pencil or holding a spoon.
 - lock boxes, beads, blocks, crayons, markers, toy tools, ring toss, easel for painting and coloring, giant legos