

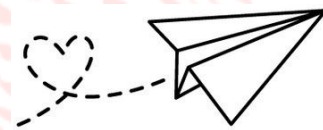
FONDAMENTAL PLAY THERAPY



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With Heart and Soul

The Remarkable Power of Play - Why Play is so Important for Children



(by Karen Young)

Childhood was different in the '60s. Children spent their days in the sunshine, playing backyard cricket or riding bikes around the neighbourhood – often in a motley crew but never in a helmet or sunscreen. Sunscreen was what happened during a lunar eclipse and protective head gear generally took the form of a cap. Worn backwards. And seatbelts? They were a sweet idea, but quite useless if there were a tribe of kids in the back.

We've learnt a lot since then and we've moved forward in a lot of ways, but we've been getting something wrong.

Since the 1960's, time children spend playing has decreased.

It's a different world today and it is no longer as safe for kids cruise to through the streets by themselves. There are different challenges and different pulls on our time. Families are busy, mums and dads are busy, kids are busy. One thing that hasn't changed since the 60s is the critical role of play in developing little people into healthy, vibrant, thriving, healthy bigger ones. It's up there with education, love and sleep.

How free play builds healthy, vibrant humans.

Free play is critical for children to learn the skills that are essential to life – skills that cannot be taught in a more formal, structured setting.

In every way, play is practice for the life. A lot of play involves imitating grown-ups – their work, their roles, the way they interact.

Learning how to play is as important as anything that can come from play. It's no accident that children will often spend as much time establishing what the play will look like, or the rules of the game, as they do actually playing it. They learn vital social and emotional skills that they could not learn anywhere else – how to get on with others, how to be empathic, nurturing, kind, strong, generous, how to deal with difficult people, how to be a part of something bigger than themselves, how to get their own needs met without crashing the needs of others. Learning how to play is as important as anything that can come from play. We want them to know that life can be fun and a happy, healthy life means being able to tap into that, even as grown-ups. As a part of play, they can't help but learn.

Play is instinctive and not just for human children – all young mammals play. This shows how important it is to development.

Research has shown that the reason children grow so slowly and are dependent for so long is because the brain is taking so much of the body's resources, leaving little available for physical growth. At mid-childhood, around the age of 4, the brain is at its busiest, maxing out synapses (connections) and developing more intensely and quickly than it will at any other age. This is when we learn an abundance of skills needed to be successful humans – social skills, curiosity, creativity, problem-solving. The world of a toddler is a busy one – so much to do! There's a lot to learn at and it's no accident that this is the age when the need for play is at its peak.

Children are naturally playful. If they have the opportunities to follow the curiosity, do what they enjoy, and discover and experiment with the world around them, they will thrive. Without it, parts of their development will struggle.

Let them play and they'll thrive. Here's how.

Children were born to play. Their development depends on it. Provide the opportunities and the development will happen:

1. Their creativity will flourish.

An extensive body of research has found that over the past few decades the amount of free play for children has reduced. In a study published in the Creativity Learning Journal, respected Professor of Education, Kyung Hee Kim wrote,

'Since 1990, even as IQ scores have risen, creative thinking scores have significantly decreased. The decrease for kindergartners through third graders was the most significant ... children have become less emotionally expressive, less energetic, less talkative and verbally expressive, less humorous, less imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate, less perceptive, less apt to connect seemingly irrelevant things, less synthesizing, and less likely to see things from a different angle.'

Across the board – in business, academia, the arts – creativity has been long been lauded as a critical asset. In an IBM poll, 1500 CEOs were asked to name the best predictor of future success. Their answer? Creativity.

2. Their cognitive function will strengthen.

A study of 9 to 10-year-olds found that those who had a higher level of aerobic fitness had more fibrous and compact white-matter tracts in their brain than their peers who were less fit. These tracts are important for attention and memory.

Clearly not many 9 or 10-year-olds are throwing on a Nike tank and popping off to the gym to pump weights or smash out a session on the treadmill. They get fit through play – climbing, running, jumping, bouncing – and now there is neurological evidence that fitness has a key role in expanding their cognitive function.

3. Their social skills will develop.

Through play, children learn how to get along with people and deal with the difficult ones. Every opportunity to play with other children is a crash course in what works and what doesn't. Other children aren't as ready to forgive antisocial behaviour as a parent might be. Similarly, other children will walk away from the play if the rules, often unsaid, aren't fair for everyone.

If they want to keep kids around (and sometimes they won't, but they'll soon learn this has its own consequences) they have to work out a way to satisfy their own needs and wants, without stepping on the needs and wants of others. There is compromise and negotiation. They will learn the edge of their own boundaries, what feels right and what doesn't, and how to respect the boundaries of others. Sometimes

there is a need for assertiveness. Sometimes there is need to walk away. Even as adults it can be hard to know which way to go.

The children with more finely honed social skills find clever ways to get what they want. Sometimes this will look like 'I'm doing you a favour' – 'Here. You can be a passenger and have a rest and look out the window and I'll be the driver and take you where you want to go? Alright?'

Others learn early on that framing assertions as questions is more likely to elicit a positive response, 'Why don't I wear the hat because I'm the driver, okay?'

Often, children spend more time negotiating how the play will take place than actually playing. Who gets to be the train driver, who gets to be the passenger, where are they going, who's in charge of the train, how do they know then the train is moving, but wait – don't we need a baddie?

The same skills are also at play in older children when they organise backyard sports. Who gets to bat? What's the order? Where are the boundaries? Who gets to bowl? What are the rules? How are ambiguous calls decided?

4. They will learn how to manage big feelings - theirs and others.

In play, things won't always go as planned. Things will move from being euphoric to devastatingly unfair – all within time it takes for the 'wand' to be transformed into a 'stick' ('No you don't have a wand, you have a stick. I have a wand so that means I'm the magic one and you are my servant. Okay? Now give me your stick servant.') Demands and tantrums might work at home, but peers will never let it slide. It is through play, often when there are no adults around to adjudicate, that children learn how to measure their own emotional responses and to deal with the responses, unacceptable or otherwise, of others. There will be times to let their big feelings out (sometimes a good cry is the only way to deal), and sometimes it will be important to hold them in. They will practice self-control, negotiation, empathy, and how to get support and give it.

5. They will discover their own power.

During play, children often have opportunities to solve their own problems that they might not otherwise have the opportunity to do. They will realise their own resourcefulness, creativity, power, and their capacity to organise the environment to meet their own needs.

How to nurture their creativity through play?

There are two types of play time: play with you and play without and play with you. Play with you will be their most favourite type of play at all. Here are a couple of ways to inspire creativity in your little people when you are with them. Perhaps you do these things already, in which case it's always good to hear that you're on the right track. (I, for one, will take that kind of feedback from anywhere it's being offered!):

- Build a story where you, your child and anyone else who is with you takes turns to add a line. *'Once upon a time there was a library. It was full of dusty books on dusty shelves, but on the very top floor was something magnificent. It looked like an ordinary box – but oh my goodness ...'* Okay. Your turn.
- Take them away from the here and now by asking open-ended, left-field questions.
 - ♥ If you were invisible/ magic/ a grown up/ could fly, what would you do?
 - ♥ If we could go for a holiday to the moon, what should we take?
 - ♥ If you were in charge of the whole entire universe, what rules would you make for yourself? What rules would you make for everyone else if you didn't have to follow those rules? Would they be different rules if you did have to follow them? What would they be?
Then ask them to ask you some questions.
- Make up different endings to the stories they're familiar with. 'What could be a different ending for 'Frozen'?' 'What might have happened if one of the stepsisters fitted the glass slipper?'
- Try an imagination game that requires them to call up things from their memory and make connections between different pieces of information. 'Imagine that you are walking on the ceiling in your bedroom. What can you see? What's your favourite thing to look at



from up there? What can you hear? What does it feel like? How are you staying up there!

- Play 'Give one back' to provide children with insight into themselves – what they prefer, how they react. 'Suppose I gave you an ice cream, a (favourite toy), or an astronaut's suit that could take you to the moon, but you had to give one back. Which one would you give back? Why? What would you do with the things you kept?
- Nurture their abstract thinking by inviting them to list unusual uses for everyday objects. You might need to get them started, but when they get the idea, sit back and watch them go. 'What are all the things you could use a spoon for? Maybe a little shovel, a thing to paint a fence with, a nose shield so falling stars don't land on it, a way to flick cooked carrot into outer space where it belongs'

And finally ...

In every way, play is practice for being an adult.

Years ago, I was having trouble deciding to whether to send my son to school at 5, which would make him one of the youngest in the class, or wait another year, making him one of the oldest. I'd poured over the literature and the research and still had no idea. Would he get bored if I kept him back? If I sent him now, how would that impact him in senior, if he was one of the youngest?

I spoke to the school principal about my dilemma and in one sentence, she brought to me a clarity that all of the research and all of the pondering couldn't.

She said, with a wisdom and grace that the 'nice' school principals seem to have patented, 'Think of it as giving him another year of play.'

And that, right there, is the essence. Our children have such a limited time to explore, experiment, grow and be enriched in the way that only free play can do. It isn't long before responsibilities and schedules set in.

But if, as the adults in their lives, we can foster a love of play, not just because 'that's what kids do', but because of its inherent importance, we will be giving them something that will hold them well in relationships, in work and in life.

Even as adults, play is important in ensuring our lives will be a beautiful success. There is a richness that lies in wait for us to move responsibility and caution aside and play.

PLAY THERAPY WITH HEART AND SOUL

(Should you have any inquiries do not hesitate to contact me)

*Kind Regards,
from the Play Therapy Room*

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