



## Value of Play

Research is universal on the benefits of play. It is the very fuel children use to explore the world, develop their mind, relate to others, solve problems, reason, acquire skills, recognize their abilities to function in the world and utilize the play experience for both physical and emotional release.

According to John Sanrock in his tenth edition of, *“Child Development,”* he emphasized, *“Play is essential to a young child’s health. As today’s children continue to experience pressure in their lives, play becomes even more critical.”*

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*“Play is part of our original equipment but it has to be nurtured to develop.”*

Stuart L. Brown, Founder, National Institute of Play

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Fortunately, the benefits of play are well established and documented by experts like Kenneth R. Ginsburg, M.D., M.S.Ed. in his clinical report for the American Academy of Pediatrics. *“Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth. Play also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children. Because every child deserves the opportunity to develop to his/her unique potential ...”*

## Elements of Play

In some ways, play can best be described as it exists in contrast to non-play. Indeed, many examples of play, if examined in isolation, can at first glance appear identical to non-play experiences. There is a dynamic quality that characterizes play.

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*“... play proves often a subtle, elusive phenomenon that seems to appear without notice and then disappear just as quickly.”*

Thomas Hendricks, *“The Nature of Play, An Overview,”* American Journal of Play

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Witness two children in a public swimming pool. One lost in the experience of weightlessness, water and pleasure, the other struggling to combat his anxiety and fear. For the first child, this is a play experience. For the second child it is a non-play experience. However, within the blink of an eye, the reluctant child could exhibit the slight beginnings of a smile and then relax and enjoy the experience.

It is perhaps at that very moment that the experience moves into the realm of play. **For it is the spirit of the experience that delivers the inherent qualities of play and it is that spirit that makes play such a powerful force within the context of a child's life.**

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*"... play is not defined in terms of a single identifying characteristic, but in terms of a confluence of characteristics, all having to do with motivation or attitude and all of which can vary in degree."*

Peter Gray, "Play as a Foundation for Hunter-Gather Social Existence," American Journal of Play

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Researchers often have slightly different definitions of play as one can observe from these two eminent thought leaders:

Catherine Garvey, Professor Psychology, University of Maine	Peter Gray, Research Professor of Psychology, Boston College
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ <i>Pleasurable and enjoyable</i></li><li>■ <i>No extrinsic goals</i></li><li>■ <i>Spontaneous and voluntary</i></li><li>■ <i>Active engagement</i></li><li>■ <i>Play has certain systematic relations to what is not play</i></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ <i>Self-chosen and self-directed</i></li><li>■ <i>Intrinsically motivated</i></li><li>■ <i>Structured by mental rules</i></li><li>■ <i>Imaginative</i></li><li>■ <i>Produced in an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind</i></li></ul>

## Benefits of Play Experiences

The struggle to master the play the experience becomes the driving force for a child to push beyond barriers in mind and body, to conquer fears and create a world where they can be fully engaged.

**It has become evident to researchers, educators, therapists, parents and caregivers, that when the spirit of play is present, possibilities for the child to grow, learn, relate, develop, explore and create multiply exponentially.**

So what are the real benefits of play? Why engage in it? Why encourage it. Why make such a big deal out of balls and stuffed bears and hula-hoops? ***Because they deliver a whole lot more than a pleasurable experience.***

This list was assembled in order to match the inherent benefits of play with specific developmental needs of a child. Each child is unique and each child has areas where toys and play can help catapult him or her into conquering their individual challenges.

## Inherent Benefits of Play Experiences

			<b>Desarrollo cognitivo</b>
			Enfocarse/atención
		<b>Desarrollo emocional</b>	Planificando
			Alfabetismo
		Mejora el estado de ánimo	Resolver problemas ■ convergente (una solución) ■ divergente (más que una)
		Confianza	
	<b>Desarrollo social</b>	Conocimiento de sí mismo	Organización
		Resistencia	
<b>Desarrollo físico</b>	Lenguaje/conversación/comunicación	Auto estima	Secuenciación
Salud corporal	Relaciones	Coraje	Tomar decisiones
Prevención de obesidad	Cooperación	Habilidades de afrontamiento	Creatividad
Destreza	Confianza	Auto compasión	Adaptación a la escuela
Coordinación de la mano/ojo	Compromiso/negociaciones	Empatía	La comprensión de cómo funciona el mundo
Fuerza muscular	Flexibilidad	Riesgo disminuido de depresión	Metamemoria (habilidades y estrategias de memoria)
Fuerza de la base	Autorregulación	Eliminación de frustraciones	Lenguaje
Balanza	Conciencia de sí mismo	Sentido de la maravilla	Imitación
Desarrollo de cerebro	Liderazgo	Conexión con la naturaleza	Proceso básico de pensamiento
Alivio físico del estrés	Habilidades de grupo	Habilidad de desactivar eventos con carga emocional (catarsis)	Juego simbólico

## Dangers of Play Deprivation

*“... play deprivation is a kind of emotional and multisensory starvation. We see the tragic evidence of it in the neglected orphans in Romania and Serbia. Remember, we’re also primates. When we’re deprived of play, we’ll suffer in ways similar to the way those laboratory animals suffered. Play is part of our original equipment, but it has to be nurtured to develop. Normally we play. When we don’t, something has gone very, very wrong, and nonplayers will suffer a number of effects.”*

Dr. Stuart L. Brown, Founder, The National Institute for Play

Children who are deprived of or have limited access to play, often experience a negative impact to their development, overall health and well-being. Yet in our society today, we continue to experience a trend towards fewer playtimes both at schools and at home. In the words of Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg he asserts, *“Child advocates must consider all factors that interfere with the optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to reap the advantages associated with play.”*

Play deprivation not only denies children the benefits of play, it has been suggested that it fosters depression, aggressive behavior, and social isolation while lowering quality of life and a child’s ability to read social cues.

Primary Symptoms of Play Deprivation	Secondary Symptoms of Play Deprivation
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The National Lekotek Center, in an effort to bring the benefits of toys into the lives of more children, developed the AblePlay concept. AblePlay is a website at [www.ableplay.org](http://www.ableplay.org) that researches, rates and reviews mainstream toys for children with special needs. Their goal is to match the developmental and recreational needs of a child to current toys and play products available in the marketplace.

<b><i>Depending on the types of play opportunity that are lacking, children could be affected in the following ways:</i></b>	<b><i>The secondary symptoms are in many ways just as insidious to the healthy development of the child:</i></b>
Poorer ability in motor tasks	Childhood obesity
Lower levels of physical activity	Nature deficit
Reduced ability to deal with stressful or traumatic situations and events	Screen addictions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ TV</li> <li>■ computer</li> <li>■ video games</li> </ul>
Impaired ability to assess and manage risk	
Poorer social skills, leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as dealing with conflict and cultural differences	Social isolation
	Bullying risk
	Difficulty relating to peers
	Inability to utilize mainstream toys

## Prescriptive Toys

*“Toys are best seen as the tools of play ...”*

Jane E. Brody, The New York Times columnist, Personal Health

**If toys can be compared to tools, then the analogy can go further. In choosing a toy, one would want to have knowledge of the applications of that tool and clear understanding of the qualities it can best deliver over other options.**

The beginning point for prescribing toys would be zeroing in on the child’s current abilities and capabilities. Then add to the equation two seemingly contradictory elements – an awareness of the existing limitations and an intuitive sense of the potential for developmental advancement within the child.

Special attention is given to the menu of toys selected, giving the child a range from simple concept-based play objects to more multifaceted items as needed. Interest levels and attention span of the child are monitored and when tolerance wanes, movement to other play elements are then woven into the play experience.

*“We fit the toy to the learning needs of the children just as a physician prescribes a specific drug for a patient,”* explains Sally deVincentis, one of the two founders of Lekotek. *“You see, for a child, play is work. It is the way children learn, so we have to give them toys they find challenging, yet not so difficult that they become discouraged.”*

### Criteria Used in Selecting Prescriptive Toy Menu

- Current abilities of the child
- Targeted skill development
- Potential abilities of the child
- Cognitive skills development
- Communicative skills development
- Sensory skills development
- Physical skills development
- Interests of child
- Interests of siblings and parents (if present)
- Play space at family home
- Current educational program (IEP)
- Others in household (i.e. choking hazards for younger siblings)

## In Summary

Parents can help children connect to the benefits of play by instigating play sessions, utilizing appropriate toys and getting involved in the actions and experiences themselves. Because when a child enters the realm of play, he also enters the realm of potential and possibilities.

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*“Let us open our homes to play and let us schedule activities around play rather than squeeze play around our activities. Let us also acknowledge that children need us to help them get going in their play, by providing stimulating environments and by entering in and injecting important knowledge from the wider world. By doing so, we will be sending the message that play is the answer to how we build happy, health, and intelligent children.”*

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, Ph.D., with Diane Eyer, Ph.D.,  
*“Einstein Never Used Flash Cards”*

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With encouragement and the right toys, children can depart from the world of struggles and tasks into the joyful experience of play and through that accomplish more than anyone ever dreamed possible.