



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO DEVELOPMENTAL PLAY

This free document has been created to support parents, childminders, nurseries and schools in having necessary conversations about developmental play.

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WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTAL PLAY?

All types of play support development, however Developmental Play from the perspective of a Paediatric Occupational Therapist looks at play as a tool to specifically focus on the development of the cognitive, social, emotional and physical and sensory processing skills of children.

This type of play brings all elements of development together and reflects:

- The importance of the parent - child relationship and developing bonds.
- Developmental appropriateness rather than age expectations, working on the stage not age of the child.
- It does not try and change the way a child plays, but meets the child where they are at, whilst offering to extend play in ways that have meaning to them as an individual.
- A sense of belonging and therefore sense of safety in the world.
- A just-right balance – ensuring that the child is challenged, but motivated, and importantly enjoying the activity.

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SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING THROUGH MOVEMENT

"It is a child's activity level and active playtime that determines his or her ultimate brain development and the extent of adult capabilities" (Dotson-Renta 2016).

Movement is not just for the development of physical skills; it is linked to the development of higher functions of the brain such as speech and language, executive function and emotional regulation. Developmental Play provides opportunities for movement which in turn supports brain-body connections, cognition and sensory processing. The ability of the brain to develop and maintain neural connections is based on new movement and play experiences of young children - give a child the chance to move and play and they will create these connections, building their brain in the process.

Moving and being present in the body through play supports a child's sensory system to develop. There are eight senses in the body:

- Vision (sight)
- Auditory (hearing)
- Tactile (touch)
- Gustatory (taste)
- Olfactory (smell)
- Vestibular (balance and orientation)
- Proprioception (body awareness and co-ordination)
- Interoception (the ability to notice and connect bodily sensations with emotions)

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SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH MOVEMENT CONTINUED

When a child is given opportunities to play, they naturally learn about their bodies in relation to themselves, in relation to space and within their environments.

The more children are developing their physical skills and sensory systems through play and movement, coupled with caring, loving adults around them, the more confident they become in themselves and the world around them to explore and learn.

Children (and adults) receiving ongoing and consistent co-regulation with trusted loved ones are able to develop self-regulation tools. This is how we as humans learn about our physical and emotional needs, that we are safe to have our needs met, and to ask for support to have these needs met. As children have experiences of co-regulation, opportunities to listen to their own unique bodily cues and emotions support their ability to self-regulate.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYFUL INTERACTIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

This is why playful, loving interactions are vital for children's emotional wellbeing and overall development. When adults follow children's cues and respond to these with love and compassion, curiosity and playfulness, children learn to do the same for themselves and for others too. Parents and caregivers are a child's environment; how that child interacts with their environment and vice versa has significant impact on their outcomes long term.

Play offers parents the chance to interact and engage fully with their children; building bonds and developing their relationship through play. Research shows that a child's "developmental trajectory is greatly affected by relationships with loving and consistent caregivers as they relate to children through play" (Shonkoff 2000).

Children do not always have the understanding to verbalise how they are feeling – play is a tool that can help them to communicate their emotions. For non-verbal children, when parents interact with them through play and playful interactions, they are able to give an insight into their world without need for words.

For children with reduced mobility or who are nonmobile – we must never assume they do not want to explore or play. Looking at access within the environment, having adults support children in play, interacting with their environment hand over hand (or hand under hand) with physical support, can open up their world and in turn support their development at whatever stage they are at.

When children feel seen, heard and valued, they feel loved, they feel they belong and their nervous systems feel nurtured. A nurtured nervous system is ready and open to learning and development. We do not have to have "set" play activities for playfulness to take place – it can be silly voices whilst children are getting dressed, making up games on the way to preschool, creating a made-up song about the day...play in the everyday and in the mundane can bring so much joy, supporting the development of bonds and the building of brains.

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CREATE DEVELOPMENTAL PLAY SPACES BY CONSIDERING:

- Developmentally appropriate play – remember stage not age.
- Meet children where they are developmentally; what do they need to access play? how is this play activity supporting their development? how can we use this to invite meaningful and playful interaction?
- Just-right balance – play that's challenging enough to strengthen skills, whilst being enjoyable, motivating, offering a sense of achievement, and belonging.
- Consider the parent or caregiver as the environment, involve them in the journey of a child's development through play.
- Play in the mundane; bring in playful interactions every day to support the development of higher brain function skills and emotional wellbeing.

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THE NEED FOR PLAY NEVER STOPS

Play is innate in us all, and develops crucial skills that last a lifetime. The need for play never stops. It develops a sense of joy, freedom and creativity, reducing stress no matter what stage of life we are in. Developmental Play in the early years builds skills that can be utilised throughout life in supporting better mental health and physical wellbeing.

GLOSSARY

Neural connections – neurons are the “information messengers” of the brain. As the brain matures, pathways are created between other neurons (like a network of highways) so that they may talk to one another more effectively and efficiently.

Sensory Systems – humans have 8 sensory systems; they each rely on sensory receptors that receive information about the internal and external environment. These are then processed by the brain to make “sense” of the world.

Co-regulation - a lifelong human biological need involving the love and care of another human to support us in managing our emotions and behaviours in ways that soothe and balance our internal world.

Self-regulation – our ability to understand and manage our emotions, behaviours (including our movements) for adaptive and successful responses to a situation. Self-regulation requires ongoing co-regulation with loving, caring individuals.

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Shonkoff JP, Phillips DA, eds. From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; 2000

Dotson-Renta, Lara N. 2016. "Why Young Kids Learn Through Movement." The Atlantic.

Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD. The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds The American Academy of Pediatrics (2007) 119 (1): 182-19.

FURTHER READING

Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul - Dr Stuart Brown

The Well Balanced Child: Movement and Early Learning – Sally Goddard Blythe

Why Motor Skills Matter – Tara Losquadro Liddle