



The Power of Play

by Dr. Benjamin Spock (excerpts)

To an adult, much of a young child's activity seems to have no distinct or serious purpose. Play is, in fact, very intense work, designed and dictated by children's emerging instincts to learn. At the same time, play is exciting and pleasurable; that's what lures children in and keeps their attention until they've mastered a particular skill.

Picture an 18-month-old boy who reaches into a wooden box and removes a dozen colorful blocks. He carefully places them in a row on the floor, or struggles to stack several on top of each other. Then, one by one, he tosses the blocks back into the box -only to haul them out a moment later for a new round of arranging and stacking.

A two-and-a-half-year-old girl clutches a purple crayon and scribbles vigorously on a sheet of paper. Although she seems riveted by her work, she makes no effort to depict an object. She simply goes through the motions of drawing, moving the crayon this way and that.

Most of us don't think of such play as educational, because it usually bears little resemblance to what's taught in school. But building a tower or drawing a picture requires as much concentration and effort as learning to read or adding numbers.

It is also important to understand and appreciate the value of children's play. Through these often-solitary games, young children teach themselves an impressive array of skills: for example pre-math skills when sorting and problem solving, science skills when testing hypotheses, and eventually, cooperative play. And by using make-believe to mimic the actions and behavior of grown-ups, children begin to understand how the world works and what is expected of them.

THE AGES OF DISCOVERY: 6-12 MONTHS

During a child's first 6 to 12 months, she will try to grab hold of any object within reach, from a wooden spoon to a set of keys. She'll turn her prize over endlessly, chew on it, and shake it if it makes a noise. These actions are all serious attempts at exploration and experimentation, not unlike a scientist's investigation of the natural world.

THE AGES OF DISCOVERY: 1 YEAR – 18 MONTHS

By the age of one, children become fascinated with putting small objects into larger containers (and trying to squeeze larger objects into smaller ones) or pushing a wheeled plaything around the house. It can take months for a baby this age to discover how to avoid obstacles as she steers her toy, bumping it into walls and furniture. It might also take her months to realize that it's easier to pull big objects than to push them. But the patience and determination that children show are proof of what a serious matter play is - and of what a high priority nature puts on learning simple skills on their own.

45 Bartlett Crescent

Brookline MA 02446

www.parentsinapinch.com

617.739.KIDS

800.688.4697

617.793.1939 fax



It is important to remember the findings of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who proved in his landmark studies on child development, that young children will learn skills at their own pace. It's essential for parents to respect nature's mysterious timetables rather than push a child to master skills before she's ready.

But some parents (and I was one of them) can't resist the temptation to lead the play. I remember watching my young son as he tried to make a toy locomotive go by pushing it across the carpet. "No, no," I said, "we have to put it on the track." Pretty soon he wandered off to find a new game of his own.

THE AGES OF DISCOVERY: 18 MONTHS-2 YEARS

At this age, children start to spend more and more time watching their parents and copying their actions. They are fascinated by everyday tasks, from sweeping the floor to driving a car. A 2-year-old, for example, might devote an entire afternoon in the sand box to preparing a make-believe meal. These games are usually solitary; a child of this age might enjoy watching other children play and may copy their actions, but she won't yet join in cooperative play with another child.

Why are children under the age of three content to play alone? A baby's love is directed primarily toward her parents and is based on dependency; she feels love for those on whom she can rely to give her what she needs. It takes a long time for them to realize any advantage in engaging a new playmate.

Consequently, it's often a wasted effort to try to get children to share before the age of three. At two, a child is extremely possessive. She knows exactly what belongs to her and guards her playthings passionately. If she sees another child reaching for her doll, she'll shriek "mine!" and grab it.

When parents try to force a two-year-old to share her toys, the child feels betrayed. As a result, she may become even more possessive. But if parents wait patiently until their child shows an interest in playing cooperatively, then it's time to encourage sharing. The best way to accomplish this is to offer suggestions that make sharing fun. "You pull Jason in the wagon, and then he will pull you." If the child rejects the suggestion, then it's best to wait a month or so before broaching the subject of sharing again.

PLAYACTING THEIR ROLES

At three and four years, children may still spend plenty of time playing on their own, but they also begin to take pleasure in playing cooperatively. Children begin to copy their parents' actions and also start imitating their speech and mannerisms.

When they play "house", children pretend to be parents and may soothe a crying baby or help bickering siblings resolve a conflict. And a child playing a nursery school teacher might praise a playmate for solving a puzzle or scold him for misbehaving. In these ways, children begin to understand what it means to be a man or a woman, a worker, and a parent. They learn how to be responsible, fair, considerate, and loving, and they develop basic ideals and stick with them throughout their lives.



Through early childhood games, children practice some of the most important skills anyone can ever learn: cooperation, sharing, getting along with and caring for others.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Kids are experts at having fun, so you don't need to do much to encourage them to play.

- Let kids take the lead. Resist the urge to take charge or correct your child.
- Provide toys that foster imagination. You don't have to spend a lot of money. Use everyday items - old clothes for playing dress up, egg cartons for crafts, junk mail for a game of post office, and cardboard boxes for building forts.
- Incorporate play into real-life activities such as gardening, cooking, and shopping. For instance, kids can help make a grocery list by drawing pictures of the items. Then they help find them in the store.
- Play together everyday. In addition to giving a child plenty of time to play with others, set aside at least half an hour everyday to give each of your children your undivided attention.