



## How Can Play Support Child Development?

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Between 0-5 years, our little ones will experience rapid brain growth. During this time, they will develop up to 90% of their brains. This means that the early years are such an important time to support development. Research shows that play is vital for children’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Within this article, I will explore the importance of play and how it supports early brain development.

### Why is play good for the brain?

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| <p><b><u>Oxytocin – the social one</u></b></p> <p>A powerful brain neurotransmitter that helps you build stronger relationships with others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oxytocin is released through physical contact e.g. tag, pat-a-cake touch rhymes, hugs</li> </ul>             | <p><b><u>Endorphins - the emotional ones</u></b></p> <p>Improve the immune system and reduce stress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Endorphins are released through vigorous and active play e.g. exercise, dance and creating music</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b><u>Dopamine - the physical one</u></b></p> <p>Happy hormone that enhances cognitive ability, and improved ability to learn and pay attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dopamine is released through movement e.g. obstacle courses, relay races, sensory circuits</li> </ul> | <p><b><u>Serotonin – the thinking one</u></b></p> <p>Neurotransmitter that impacts mood, memory and learning. Different types of play can increase the production of these hormones.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serotonin is released through light and exercise e.g. regular opportunities for outdoor play, yogic laughter</li> </ul> |

Play releases ‘feel good hormones’, these hormones prove beneficial in supporting the key areas of development.

## **Play to support social development**

Play develops children socially, as they begin to learn how to co-operate, negotiate and problem solve. At this stage adults can scaffold this by feeding in additional information.

- Role play – doctors and nurses, police, shop keepers, vets etc
- Serve and return communication – 2-way conversation e.g. child has a picture of a mouth and adult has a picture of an ear. When the child has the mouth, they can talk and the adult listens. When the child has the ear, they listen as the adult talks.



- Turn taking games – Jenga, Skittles, play a sound on a musical instrument and the children have to take it in turns to pass the sound around,
- Co-operative construction e.g. building dens, block play, Lego play



## **Play to support the emotional development**

Emotional skills develop through play, as our little ones begin to learn how to control their impulses. Alongside this, play promotes the ability to begin to understand, recognise and regulate their emotions. Adults can support at this stage, we call this co-regulation.

- Story times – ‘Have you filled a bucket today?’, ‘The colour monster’, ‘The way I feel’
- Emotion charades – make a face and the child has to guess the emotion
- Mini Pixar movies – great to talk about how characters might be feeling
- Group free play provides children with the opportunity to build self confidence and experiment with different emotions e.g. in a garden, in a park, at playtime

## **Play to support physical development**

Physical play provides children with the skills to promote the development of strong, healthy bodies, fine and large motor skills and co-ordination. Play that promotes physical development is also beneficial for enhancing social and emotional skills.

- Sensory circuits (see factsheet for additional information) Opportunities for outdoor play – going to the park, going for a walk, going for a bike ride, playtimes at school
- Fine motor skills activities – threading pipe cleaners through a sieve, cutting, Lego play, pegging things on a washing line
- Gross motor skills activities – Running, jumping, throwing a ball, climbing

## **Play to support cognitive development**

Play promotes children’s cognitive skills, as they begin to develop independent thinking, literacy skills and scientific and mathematical thinking.

- Pretend play/object play – children use beginning to use objects and imagine they are something else e.g. a banana may become a phone, material may become a superhero cape
- Small world – fantasy figures, dinosaurs, animal figures, superheroes
- Block play
- Matching shapes – using pots and pans and the child has to match the correct lid to the pan

