

Child's Play...It's Fun and So Much More!

Remember the days when the sounds of children playing outside could be heard throughout the neighbourhoods and that the only time it became silent was when their mothers called them home for supper and bedtime? As the saying goes, "times have certainly changed" and there are lots of reasons why children do not play out-of-doors as much as they used to.

Children are busier than ever with school work and other scheduled activities. The world they live in is seen as a scarier and more dangerous place that does not allow them to be as independent or free to roam around as they once used to. And then there is the ever present lure of the "screens" – television, video games, internet and smartphones that compete with children actively playing outside. Many people feel child's play is all about fun and while that is indeed a part of it, it is so much more.

Play helps children to explore and learn about the world around them and it is through the different types of play (social, cognitive or intellectual and physical) that children develop skills that remain with them throughout their lives. These include the development of creativity through the use of imagination, social skills such as listening, taking turns and how to get along with others, memory and problem solving, concentration and self-discipline and skills for coping with stress. Also with the use of small and large muscles through more active play, children develop fine and gross motor skills (such as picking up small objects or running) and coordination (the ability to control body parts while doing different activities).

Physical play that is active enough to cause children to breathe faster, hearts to beat more rapidly and to feel warm or sweaty when crawling, walking, running, jumping, skipping can have additional benefits. That is if it becomes part of a child's daily routine along with eating healthy, it can prevent some of the long term health concerns that are seen by being sedentary or inactive like obesity (excessive body fat), and developing chronic diseases that include the heart (such as high blood pressure), type 2 diabetes and bone health problems.

The *Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines* recommend that children 1-4 years get at least 180 minutes of physical activity per day at any level of intensity while 5-17 year olds get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day. Even infants less than a year old are encouraged to be physically active through floor based play. Unfortunately, findings from the 2015 report card on physical activity for children and youth show that while 70% of children 3-4 years old reach their daily recommended activity level, only 9% of the 5-17 year olds do. So what can parents do to encourage physical play?

Establish daily routines by having your child walk or bike to school if at all possible. Also have them pick out something they can put in their backpack like a skipping rope or a basketball that allows for active play during recess and lunch breaks. After school children should be encouraged to play energetic games with friends and/or where possible join a school team. Going on vacation should not cause a problem either as depending on how and where you travel, children can bring along their bicycle, frisbee, or swimwear to continue active play throughout the day.

Ease your fears about letting children play freely outdoors. Teach children basic safety precautions for when they play outside so that they can recognize danger or the potential for danger and take the appropriate action to avoid it. Encourage them to play with a buddy or other children.

Reduce screen time, all of the time. Make family rules that limit the amount of screen time children watch each day. If you are not watching TV but have it on in the background, children will be drawn to it so turn it off and put on some music instead. Make screen time a time to also be active. Play with little ones during commercial breaks or challenge the family to see who can do the most sit ups, jumping jacks or leg lifts during that time. Don't allow a TV, computer or cellphone in your child's bedroom; keep them in a common place within the home where you can monitor their use.

Research shows that when children play outside they move more, sit less and play longer. So let's encourage our children to play outdoors and have fun while growing, developing and keeping fit.

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