



## Play With Me!

One constant that we can always count on, regardless of cultural or social situations, is that young children will play. If you ask a young child why he plays, he'll probably say "Because it's fun!" Of course, being adults, we have to define play in terms we are comfortable with. Below is an overview of play theory and theorists from the past 100 years.



**Herbert Spencer**, psychologist and philosopher, born in 1820. He stated that humans have a constant amount of energy that must be expended. Early in our existence, most, if not all, of that energy was used just meeting basic needs. As our civilization advanced, and less energy was used meeting these needs, we have had to compensate by expending our excess energy in some other manner, namely, play.

**Sigmund Freud**, psychoanalyst, born in 1856. He suggested that play was a way of expressing socially unacceptable behaviors. Play was therapeutic, allowing one to vent undesirable feelings and actions in a more acceptable manner.

**Karl Groos**, zoologist, born in 1861. He studied play first in animals, then in humans. He explained that play was a way of preparing for survival in the adult world. **Maria Montessori**, born in 1870, elaborated on this theory. She proposed that children would be better off if they spent their play learning, or imagining, useful things. These two theorists feel that "play is the child's work."

**Jean Piaget**, psychologist, born in 1896. His work focused on intellectual development in children, and his play theory reflects that. He suggested that human intellect develops in stages through assimilation (transforming the environment to meet the requirements of self), or play, and accommodation (transforming self to meet the requirements of the environment), or work.

**Lev Vygotsky**, psychologist, also born in 1896. His play theory emphasizes social development. He suggests that there is an ability level that children can reach but not without help from adults, which he refers to as a *zone of proximal development*, or ZPD. When children play, they give cues to adults about their readiness to learn new skills with assistance.

**David Elkind**, chair of the Department of Child Development at Tufts University, suggests that children play for personal, experiential reasons, and any developmental value is beside the point. In other words, they just want to have fun!

So, what value is there in play? Many studies show connections between play and both intellectual and social skills, such as memory, verbal abilities, school adjustment, and getting along with others. Studies also show that play is where children first show their ability to delay gratification, to take another person's point of view, to think abstractly, and to voluntarily follow rules. Most play researchers advocate adults having a role in children's play, so here are five tips on how to play with your child.

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### Five tips on how to play with your child:

**T**alk about different roles that people play and how these roles are related to each other. After a trip to the post office, talk about the different people that are required, like the cashiers, who sell stamps and postage services, the sorters, the loaders, the truck drivers and plane pilots, the people who put gas in the vehicles, the deliverer, and the recipient. After a visit to a restaurant, how many different roles can you think of? Allow the children to volunteer for roles to play, or help them at first by assigning them, if necessary.

Role play everyday scenarios.

**H**elp children plan their play. Talk about who they are going to be, what they are going to play—as opposed to play with—and what is going to happen while they play. Encourage the children to discuss these things with each other.

Plan and discuss play.

**E**xtend their play when it breaks down. When two children begin bickering over a toy, enter to extend the play. For instance, pretend to knock on a door and ask if now is a good time for a visit. Refocus the play away from the distraction and allow them to continue in the play time.

Extend, intervene, and refocus.

**P**rovide a safe play environment for children. Go beyond age appropriate materials, and also get to the safety of the children when interacting with each other. Have the children help develop rules for play that ensure safety and help to prevent injuries.

Involve children in creating safe environments.

**E**ncourage imaginative and creative play, rather than imitative play. When children begin to focus on violent or silly actions that are very narrow in scope, help them to expand the scope of play by refocusing them on other roles, other solutions to problems, and other skills that can be used to achieve the same result. Banning any type of play, violent or otherwise, rarely works for long. Help children work through issues that are restricting their imagination and creativity. Suggest painting, story-telling, and later, writing as other ways that are easier to control when dealing with these types of issues.

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