

The Parenting for Life Series Presents:

# Let's Play!

## A Child's Road to Learning





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*Let's Play!* is the third in a series of booklets and other materials for the PARENTING FOR LIFE education program.

PARENTING FOR LIFE is an award-winning, non-profit public education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. This unique initiative includes booklets, posters and a *parenting program Facilitator's Guide*. *Today's Parent* magazine was the original partner in Parenting for Life, in collaboration with **Strong Minds Strong Kids** and Kodak.

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# First Words

How simple it seems, the image of children at play. But look closer, there's more going on than meets the eye. Children explore their world and learn about themselves through play. The games and spontaneous activities that fill up most of their time during these early years are actually teaching them critical skills that will be important for the rest of their lives.

When you become involved, your child's play is enriched even more. Nothing enhances the bond between parent and child like playing together, even if it's just tossing a ball back and forth in the yard.

Playing with your child is a wonderful investment of your time. In these pages, you'll find easy ideas and great tips that can make your child's playtime even more fruitful. The best part is all you need to make it work is a little imagination and a lot of love.

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We would like to thank the members of the Advisory Committee of **Strong Minds Strong Kids** who shared their expertise with us during the development and design of **Let's Play!** Dr. Ester Cole, Dr. Jane Margles, Wanda Matuszkiewicz, Claire McDerment and Judith Shapira.

# Let's Play!

## A Child's Road to Learning

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# Play and Learning

## The wonder of it all


Kids playing — it's such a common sight that parents often take it for granted. It's easy to think playing is "just for fun", but there is so much more to it than that. Play is a very real way for all children to explore and learn about the world around them.

- Evan is using his blocks to make a bridge on the floor. He drives a plastic car over it once or twice, then knocks it down and begins to build a spaceship instead. His sister's dolls are retrieved from her room to become alien pilots. After they've taken over the earth, Evan rearranges the blocks to form Batcave, and the dolls are renamed Batman and Robin.
- Kanchana drags her green plastic caterpillar behind her on its string. "Come on Mikey," she says. "We're going to the vet."
- Jaime and Dylan waited while Mom and Dad raked the leaves into a big pile in the front yard. Now they're taking turns throwing themselves into the soft mound, laughing and tossing leaves at each other.
- Zayd and his Dad are playing checkers. Zayd frowns as he squints at the board, concentrating, as he figures out his next move. Then he suddenly breaks into a delighted grin and jumps over one of his father's pieces, removing it from the board.

Evan and the others aren't just fooling around or wasting time. In fact, Evan and Kunchana are developing their imagination as well as fine motor skills, while Jaime and Dylan are experiencing the fun of being outdoors and playing together. Zayd, too, is learning, developing more complex planning and thinking abilities.

Why is play  
so important?





## **Hands-on discovery is the most effective way for children to learn.**

The child sorting buttons or building with blocks is learning mathematical concepts like shapes and quantity. A child on a playground climber is learning about balance and what his body can do. When youngsters act out stories they learn to control their attention and use their memories to stay in character and stick to the story line.

There are many more benefits of play. Whether your child is two or eight years old, his games and activities contribute to his growth and development.

- **CHILDREN LEARN “HOW TO LEARN” THROUGH PLAY.** Play involves a lot of trial and error. A toddler tries to push a square block into a round hole. It doesn't fit. He turns it around and tries again. He pushes harder. It still won't fit. His father, who has been watching, holds out a round block. The boy takes the block and tries. It fits! He smiles at his Dad. Gradually he will learn to connect the shape of the block with the shape of the hole. This is one of the ways he will learn to connect ideas, a skill that is important for all types of learning. He will also learn to copy others- both adults and children- and to carry over ideas he learned in one area to another.
- **PLAY DEVELOPS IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY.** For Inger, the washcloth her mother hands her in the bathtub can be a veil, a magic cape or tent. Noam exuberantly smears fingerpaints on the slick paper and creates a landscape in colours no one has seen before.
- **PLAY HELPS A CHILD WORK THROUGH STRESSFUL OR WORRYING SITUATIONS.** After Samantha saw a squirrel get run over in the street, she spent some time playing with her toy cars and various stuffed animals. Over and over again, the cars crashed into the toy creatures. Sometimes Samantha had an ambulance come to rescue the injured toy. Other times the stuffed animal attacked and ate the car. Eventually she had sorted out her feelings and went on to other games.





- **CHILDREN LEARN SOCIAL SKILLS THROUGH PLAY.**

Eight year old Marika says: “Let’s have a birthday party with my stuffed animals.” Her friend Alana holds up her doll. “Sally wants to play school,” she protests. “Maybe we could have the party and then play school?” suggests Marika. These kinds of interactions during play help children learn important social skills like listening, taking turns and how to get along with others.

*“When my father was in the hospital, we spent a lot of time in the waiting room. I made up “I spy” games — you know — “I spy with my little eye, something that starts with D” — to keep the boys from going wild. Now I’ve noticed how much they learned from that. They’re better at taking turns and I think it helped Nilesh with his reading.”*

**Play is Fun!** Kids love vigorous, active physical play like climbing, running and jumping. They also enjoy quiet or creative play. All of these types of play can relieve children’s stress and help them relax. Adults sometimes think that play is trivial, especially for older kids, and want children to spend more time on structured learning such as reading, computer learning programs and organized lessons or sports. These activities all have their place in a child’s life, but they aren’t better or more valuable than play.





## Play at School

**Educators consider play a valuable tool for learning.** You may have heard of the importance of “early learning”. But that doesn’t refer to sitting preschoolers down for math and reading lessons. In fact, today’s early learning programs often incorporate fun, play-based activities into the structure of classroom life. When the environment is enjoyable children become more engaged in learning.

Derek volunteered in his daughter’s grade one class on the day they were learning about ancient Egypt. He was surprised by what he saw. “Some kids were dressed up in costumes, one group was working on a mural about the Pyramids and another was making mummies out of plaster.”

The teacher explained to Derek that even though it looked like they were “just playing”, each activity was carefully planned to help children learn specific concepts or skills.

## What Makes a Good Toy?

**The best toys aren’t the most expensive or those heavily advertised in the media.**

Your child will probably have more fun with toys that can be played with in a variety of ways — building blocks, art supplies, musical toys, kitchen utensils and tools can all be wonderful toys. Remember that old joke that “kids would rather play with the box than the toy that came in it?” It’s often true — so save boxes, plastic containers and other items to be props for your child’s imagination and learning.



*“For Matthew, anything can be a toy. A cup becomes the pilot of his spaceship; a cartoon monster action figure is assigned the role of the doctor when he plays hospital. In the bath, he makes the soap be the daddy, the sponge be the mommy, and the washcloth is the baby. I’m always impressed by the power of his imagination.”*





### The play's the thing!

From hand-eye co-ordination to imaginative thinking, play contributes greatly to all aspects of your child's growth and development.



# Play Through the Ages

## More than just fun and games

**Children's play gradually evolves as their bodies develop and their minds mature.**

It's important to remember that all children develop at their own pace, whether they are siblings or friends. Sometimes it is hard not to compare your kids with your neighbour, but you should resist the urge because every child is unique. While many four year olds, for example, are ready to share with their playmates, some resist strongly. If your child doesn't fit the typical picture, don't worry. He's simply developing at his own rate. The benefits of play that contribute to your child's development are many and varied. Following are a few examples of how the two activities are linked.



## Hand-eye co-ordination

An infant has little co-ordination. You may still remember the exciting day when your baby first discovered her hands and tried to get her finger to her mouth (and probably poked herself in the eye!). Hand-eye co-ordination is an ability that develops throughout childhood and into adult life.

At two, your little girl might be able to catch a gently lobbed beach ball; by five or six she can probably use a joystick to steer a car through a racecourse in a video game.

## Fine-motor skills

You may have seen your three year old dissolve in tears as he accidentally cuts the head off the picture he was trying to clip from a magazine. While he enjoys crafts and loves to sprinkle glitter on everything, he's not yet capable of creating a detailed project with tools or small pieces. **As children grow and their fine-motor skills improve, they can comfortably use scissors, pens and markers.** By the age of six, they make take real pleasure in producing a picture or building an elaborate sandcastle.

## Conceptual thinking

**Many activities involve children in problem solving and help them develop a range of skills such as understanding the concepts of measurement.**

- Three year old Ian pours water from his small, wide-mouthed cup into a tall, narrow cup and is surprised to see the water fills the new cup right to the top. He carefully pours it back into his wider cup and notices it's only half full. Right now, this still puzzles him, but eventually these observations will help him to understand the measurement of volume.
- Martha, age eight, and her friends are building a snowfort in the playground of their apartment building. How big should it be? Martha measures a line by taking five steps and piling some snow where she stops, then takes five more steps in the other direction. She's measured and marked an outline for their snowfort in a creative way, using her feet instead of a ruler.

# Social development

**By the time a child is two, he may be ready to move beyond the world of playing alone.** But he is not yet able to play by “rules” or engage in give-and-take with a friend. He may watch other children play, perhaps in a play group or nursery school setting. It’s his way of getting involved, without physically joining the activity. Older toddlers often play alongside each other, but they’ll rarely play with each other, no matter how many times their parents say, “Play nicely!”

Usually by four, youngsters become more sociable, seeking contact with other children their age in the neighbourhood, at nursery school and within a play group. Around five, children may start exchanging toys or ideas with a playmate. It is at this age that friends play a stronger role in your child’s life.

The social aspect of play becomes even more important during the school years and has a major role in a child’s development of social and emotional skills. Play also contributes to the development of resiliency: the skills and assets that help children learn to manage, cope with and enjoy their lives. To learn more about resiliency read the Parenting for Life booklet *Kids Can Cope: Parenting Resilient Children at Home and at School* available on the web site [www.StrongMindsStrongKids.ca](http://www.StrongMindsStrongKids.ca) (can be downloaded or ordered).

## Co-operative learning

Babies learn to co-operate in their earliest interactions with their parents- changing diapers, putting on clothes or being fed. These experiences set the stage for playing co-operatively with other family members and eventually other children.

For preschoolers, playing with others presents many challenges. The concept of taking turns or following rules isn’t easily mastered. At this age, co-operative games and activities, where young children can practise following the rules and playing together without the emotional pressures of competition, are probably best.

Children 6 years of age and older, though, may be interested in more competitive play and group games, including organized sports. Their desire to compete may be satisfied by a foot race across the

backyard, or they might want to sign up for a soccer or hockey team. Organized sports may be offered by your community school or through your local parks and recreation program.



## Imaginative thinking

The rich world of imagination is a wonderful place all children visit from time to time. Whether imitating parents or creating elaborate stories, your child uses his imagination daily, beginning at a very early stage. Through imagination, children gain a better understanding of their feelings and experiences. This type of play is a very normal way for young children to express themselves; sometimes it's easier to play things out, rather than talk things out. Your child's imagination may lead him to develop imaginary friends. Don't fret that this is a sign of loneliness, consider this "friend" as an opportunity to glimpse into your child's creative growth and enjoy the experience.

- At two, Mario learns a lot about imaginative play from the adults in his life. His babysitter, Lisa, says to him, "Let's pretend we're puppy dogs," and he laughs as he crawls around the floor with her, barking at the cat. He also likes to imitate his parents as they work around the house, and, in his games, he pretends the couch is a bus or a boat, depending on his story.
- At five, Emile's imagination takes him far beyond the real world. He knows about monsters under the bed and dragons living above the clouds. Some days he pretends he's Superman rescuing people from alien invasions; other times, he's a builder creating a castle. He's not always sure about the difference between his imaginary world and the real one, but he uses play to test it out.



*"This is my best game. I got out my dolls and they have a big swimming party in the bathtub. Then we put them on towels to dry, and then we pick out clothes for them to wear and get them dressed. Then we put them all to bed." Olivia, age five.*

- Cassie, at age seven, is able to create detailed imaginative games and stories. She knows that dragons don't exist, but isn't entirely certain about monsters under the bed. She likes to involve others in her creative play now, assigning them roles and incorporating their ideas into the game. Her developing imagination will continue to enrich her play.

## Different kids, different play styles

### **Each child brings his own "style" to the way he plays.**

Some youngsters are very physical and active in their games, while others are more talkative, offering a running commentary on the action. Still others are happiest playing on their own.

- Fiona can play by herself for a very long time. And she'll keep the game going long after everyone else may think it is over. When her mother tries to wash Fiona's face at night, she'll say, "Don't smudge my lipstick," carrying on the pretend game she started hours ago.
- Kylie and Keitha particularly enjoy make-believe games and role-playing — I'll be the mommy, you be the baby — which help make them make sense of the world. Through these games, they act out their insecurities and frustrations, and learn another person's point of view. They can "replay" a visit to the doctor (where they received a shot), and change the ending of the story. This is how they imagine being a grown-up in the world.
- Nasir delights in physical pleasures: digging in mud or running around the school playground. He revels in games too, kicking a football or playing catch whenever he gets the chance.
- Diane is a very sociable child who loves to play with older kids. She always has a playdate arranged for after school and pleads for sleepover parties every weekend.



## When play expresses a problem

**Children's play can sometimes express aggression, anger, defiance or other strong emotions. At other times the way a child plays could indicate a problem.** Check with your child's doctor if your child:

- Can almost never "play nicely"  
It's normal for toddlers and even preschoolers to have frequent conflicts, or for children of any age to have occasional trouble getting along with playmates. But if your child's play is always angry, aggressive or uncooperative, seek advice from a medical or mental health professional.
- Plays in a rigidly repetitive or ritualistic way  
Children often enjoy playing the same games and themes over and over again. But if your child's play is rigidly repetitive — for example, he always just lines up his animals in the same order instead of making up stories or playing with them in a variety of ways, talk to your doctor.

## Boy play/girl play

**Some kids gravitate toward gender-specific toys** — tea sets for girls, trucks for boys — **while others like to ignore the stereotypes** and try different activities, what's important is that you offer children a wide range of activities to take part in, while respecting their choices and unique set of interests.



# Playing With Your Child

## Prime time together

**Play is a natural way for adults and children to have fun together.** Playing with your child is an ideal way to spend one-on-one time together, devoting that special attention she needs. Through play, you can learn a lot about your child: what's on her mind and what she enjoys. And, especially as your child grows older, play is a wonderful way to keep your relationship strong.

- Alyssa's mother marvels as she watches her daughter discover something new, sharing her sense of mastery as she faces a challenge. "Laughter together is the best part of playing together," she says.
- Peter's Dad says their family's most memorable "play" moments have nothing to do with a new toy fresh out of the box. It's Peter's delight as he finds bugs under a rock, or his surprising sophistication when he plays restaurant and scribbles his father's order, then scurries off to prepare a feast of lettuce and chocolate pudding (grass and mud).



*"I enjoy playing alongside my children. Fiona likes to draw with me. Noah likes me to play tennis with him. They set the rules and tell me what to do."*

## A Parent's Role in Play

There is no "right" way to play together. How you spend your play time will vary depending on the age of your children and whether you live in a city or rural setting.



**Coffee, tea or me?** How about all three? Finding the time to play with your child is always time well spent. It's not just fun, playing together is a great way to discover more about your child and what's important to her.

The activities you share will also be affected by your cultural upbringing, personalities and preferences. Parents play several roles in children's play. We entertain, teach, supervise and sometimes participate as active playmates, playing along in activities our children have chosen.

Here are some tips for making sure your play stays fun and safe:

### **Follow Your Child's Lead.**

Pay attention to your child and base your actions on her interests and responses. Help her do what she wants to do rather than what you think she should do.

### **Children have short attention spans.**

Be prepared to keep activities short, take breaks and switch activities as your child's interest or energy level changes. This is especially important with preschoolers.

### **Keep it simple.**

Young children often get pleasure from very simple and spontaneous activities. Just having the opportunity to spend time with you means a lot to them.

### **Focus on fun, not competition.**

Even though young children may like the idea of competing to win, they can't handle losing very well. Try to play games where everyone wins.



## **Rough and Tumble Play**

Many fathers enjoy rough and tumble play like wrestling or letting children climb on them. Kids love this kind of play with either parent. But for some men who enjoy and relate to physical play, rough and tumble play can be a key way to connect with their kids. It's important to keep vigorous physical play safe, to teach children the limits of rough play and to watch for signs that children have had enough.

# What can you do today?

Gather sticks and pieces of wood outdoors, make a pretend fire pit

Start a collection of bottle caps, rocks, sticks, snail shells dead bugs

"Sell" each other hockey cards, books and clothes

Do whatever Mom and Dad are doing (baking, dusting, writing a shopping list)

Try gardening. Children love this because they can safely use many of the same tools adults use; trowel, watering can, hose

Dance to music; pretend to be on stage. (You can borrow wonderful tapes and CDs of music from all over the world at many libraries)

Play dress-up with funny hats or old shirts

Build an obstacle course with pillows

Make a rainy-day picnic on the living room floor

Hide a penny and hunt for it. Tell the searchers when they're getting "warmer"

Play "I spy with my little eye... something that is..."

Cut and paste from seed catalogues, old sewing catalogues, travel brochures, magazines, advertising flyers

Go for a walk and collect materials for a collage

Go to a parent-child drop-in centre or some other place your children enjoy visiting

Water play with plastic cups and containers

**Tip:** Always make sure your child's play environment is safe — check for dangling cord blinds, removable screen windows, or toxic cleaning solutions that might be within easy reach of your toddler.

# Playing Alone

One can be fun

**Often when your child is playing alone, you get wonderful glimpses into his inner world of imagination, or watch blossoming creativity.**

While very young children usually need some help from adults to get a play activity going, as children mature they learn to enjoy playing on their own.

- Brittany kneels on her bed, a feather boa draped on her shoulders, and her stuffed animals in a line in front of her. "Come on now, little chicks," she says, "it's time to learn to fly."

## The Value of Solitary Play

Playing with others is great, but learning to entertain or amuse ourselves when we are alone is also a valuable skill. The child who can find things to do when no one else is available has become more independent.

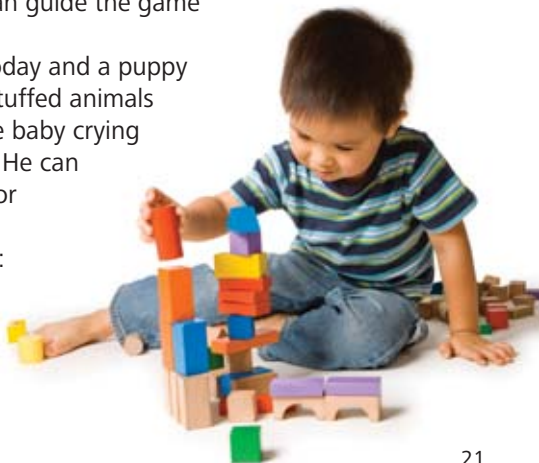
When children play alone, they can guide the game any way they choose.

- Jacob can be a wrestling star today and a puppy tomorrow; he can boss all his stuffed animals around this morning and be the baby crying to be picked up this afternoon. He can play one game for a long time or change activities often.

Creative play is often solitary play:

painting, drawing or making crafts can all be done alone.

Some children are drawn to this type of play and enjoy the privacy of it.





*"It's funny how much Alyssa loves to just play by herself. She even enjoys going on car trips because she can sit in her booster seat with her dolls around her and have a wonderful time. Sometimes when I announce "We're here!" she's disappointed — she doesn't want to stop her game."*

- Lori is deep in conversation with her lego people as she builds them a circus arena. When she notices her Mom standing at the door, she stops talking: this game is a private one, and no one was invited to participate.

### **Some kids find it more difficult to entertain themselves.**

Jared's mother Hillary, commented that he always wanted her company, and would frequently interrupt her work to ask her to play with him. How do you encourage a child to play alone?

Try these ideas:

- **START THE GAME OFF**, then gradually withdraw. You might get out the dollhouse and move the dolls around, setting up a little scene with your child's help, then excuse yourself to go to the bathroom or put in a load of laundry. Be prepared to come back later if your child calls you.
- **LET YOUR CHILD PLAY NEAR YOU**, but not with you. Set out some craft materials on the kitchen table while you are preparing a meal, and encourage your child to see what he can make.
- **STOCK UP ON SUPPLIES** that encourage solitary, imaginative play (see page 24).

Solitary play is worth encouraging. It helps children learn and challenge themselves.





# Getting crafty

**When it comes to crafts, the process is much more important than the product.** Most young children simply enjoy the experimenting with the materials they are using. They like mixing colours to see what happens and gluing things just to see how they'll look.

A great way to encourage the production of these "masterpieces" is to put them on display. The fridge door is a popular place; other parents use a clothesline on the family room wall to hang completed artwork, or a bulletin board in the kitchen. If the craft is fragile or otherwise short-lived (such as a creation made from interlocking blocks), you can take a photograph of it.

Your child doesn't have to have a lot of artistic talent to enjoy being creative. He doesn't even need expensive store-bought art kits. See our list for some helpful hints.

## Arts and crafts supplies

- Fabric scraps
- Toilet paper tubes
- Glitter, glue sticks and white glue
- Empty containers, egg cartons
- Beads, string
- Construction paper, stickers
- Washable markers, pastels, paints
- Playdough, fingerpaints
- Stampers and ink

## Supplies for playing alone

- Dolls, action figures, stuffed animals
- Dollhouses, toy garages and other playsets
- Interlocking building blocks
- Regular building blocks
- Dress-up clothes, hats, shoes, scarves



*"I've learned not to ask 'what is it?' when Jeremy shows me something he has made. He just gets offended. Now when he hands me one of his creations, I look it over carefully, admire the colours and the way he attached the egg carton to the toilet paper roll and used lots of glitter, and he's happy."*

# Playing with Others

## That's what friends are for

**As children grow, playing with friends seems to take on more importance.** In many different ways, friends help to expand our children's world.

- Melissa has always enjoyed playing solo — building or painting, for example — but now that Melissa is five, cooperative play with friends seems more appealing. She is exposed not only to different toys and games, but to various styles of play. Her social skills are blossoming as she learns to negotiate, take turns and share with teammates.

## Picking playmates

**What if your child doesn't get many invitations?** If he's happy to play with his siblings, you might not want to push him into other relationships. If however, he wants to play with other kids, try these ideas.

For younger children:

- Arrange a playtime with neighbourhood parents
- Visit a local park or drop-in centre where other parents may be with their kids

**For older children:**

- Throw a small party for a few classmates for a seasonal celebration like Halloween or a birthday. Parties are a great way to break the ice.

Some children would rather play at their friends' houses than invite a friend over. That's fine sometimes, but you should strive for a balance in these arrangements.



*"The first time Ryan threw a ball and Cameron caught it and threw it back, I knew we'd reached a new stage in sibling relationships. The more they play together, the better friends they become."*

## What should we play now?



**Kids love to imitate the world around them.** Next time your son or daughter has a couple of friends over and they're looking for something to do, suggest one of the following ideas and then watch their imaginations take over.

**BEACH.** Lay beach towels on the living room floor; get out the umbrellas, radio and sunglasses. It's a day at the beach!

**HIDEOUT.** Let the kids build a hideout in the basement, with all the toys around them.

**OFFICE.** Put an old keyboard or typewriter on a table top: it's an office with a computer!

**RECORDING STUDIO.** Dig out the old cassette player. Kids love to hear their voices. Or let them use the old telephone (not plugged in).

**RESTAURANT.** Kids like to "write" on anything adults do — old cheques, paper, pads of paper, pocket calendars. Let them take your order! Use play food, or let your kids stretch their imaginations and pretend that various household items are the main course.



All dressed up, and everywhere to go. Through dress-up play, children can “try on” all kinds of roles, experiences and relationships

## Sorting out squabbles

**Playtime isn't always peaceful.** It's normal for children to disagree when they play together. After all, they're just learning to negotiate and share. Here are a few tips for getting the kids back on track:

- **Toddlers Need Help.** Two and three year old playmates need very close supervision, partly for general safety, and partly because parents sometimes need to step in quickly when conflict arises. Some children this age can be quick to hit or bite during conflict.

**Give older children a chance to sort it out.** As children mature parents don't always need to jump in immediately. Express your confidence, saying something like, “I'll bet you two can figure out a solution. If you get stuck, then come to talk to me.”

- **Don't lay blame.** Try not to say things like "who did what?" You throw fuel on the fire when you lay blame. Instead, focus on trying to find a solution.
- **Don't be afraid to step in** if the kids are about to come to blows. You may have to separate them physically and suggest they take a few minutes to calm down.
- **Be a calming influence.** Help the children to settle down. That may mean taking a couple of two year olds onto your lap for a while or sending two five year olds to opposite corners of the room.
- **Ask for their input.** If the children are old enough, ask for their suggestions on how to work out the problem. They may surprise you.
- **Offer your own solutions.** Perhaps you could set the timer on the stove to tell them when it's the other child's turn. Or, maybe it's time to suggest a new game or a break.

### Guns and other weapons

Many moms and dads feel very strongly about not buying toy guns or other play weapons. Other parents feel that to make something forbidden is to make it even more attractive. In either case, some children will turn anything from a pencil to a stick into a laser gun or sword. Whatever you choose, you should discuss with your children the reasons for your concerns and/or decision.





# Active Play

## Let's get physical

**Lights, camera, action!** Growing children need to be active. Some youngsters seem to be bursting with energy and unable to sit still, but even children with a quieter temperament need some active, energetic play. Active play builds strength, co-ordination and physical confidence. It also increases memory and concentration skills. Many parents have also noticed that their children are happier and better behaved after vigorous outdoor exercise.

**Outdoor spaces can be wonderful for children to burn off some energy.** Many communities have playgrounds with climbers, swings, slides and other playground equipment, but it's also very valuable for children to play in more natural environments. Climbing up and down hills, crawling under bushes, splashing in puddles and streams, and balancing on tree stumps are great ways to develop physical skills. In a natural environment, children often play more creatively, searching out new things to do. Active climbing or running can be mixed with quieter play like sorting leaves from different trees or watching ants returning to their hill.



*"We have a climber in our backyard, and while the kids do play on it sometimes, they spend even more time rolling down the hill, climbing the trees, and playing in the fort they created under the hedge."*

## It's SO cold outside!

Long Canadian winters can be stressful for parents and children. It's important to get outdoors when possible, because children need fresh air and sunlight. Without it, their eating, sleeping and coping skills are affected. In short, kids get cabin fever, too. What do you think when the cold snowy weather hits?



**How does your garden grow?** Active outdoor play is necessary for growing kids: physically, it helps build strength, co-ordination and confidence; mentally, it improves concentration and memory skills.



*"Unless the weather is really dreadful, I try to get Alonzo and Rafael outside every day, even if it's just for a little while. Sometimes they need a lot of encouragement to go out to play, but they end up having so much fun that I can hardly persuade them to come back inside when they start getting cold."*

- **DRESS THEM WARMLY AND HEAD OUT TO PLAY!** Build snowmen and snowforts, make angels in the snow, throw snowballs at a target tacked to the fence. You can have lots of fun outdoors if you're dressed properly.

- **TAKE UP SOME WINTER SPORTS.** "I think every Canadian Child should know how to skate," says Anne, the mother of three boys. Kids also love sledding, hockey and cross-country skiing.
- **GET CREATIVE IN THE SNOW.** Make snow sculptures to decorate your front yard. Put some snow in a flat pan and drizzle maple syrup on it for a delicious "snow candy" treat. Make snowballs and pack them in plastic bags in the freezer, to be brought out next summer.

But maybe the weather isn't cold and snowy. Maybe it's that horrible wet sleet that nobody can play in. Maybe it's cold and muddy, with no snow on the ground. Your child's been cooped up too long and needs to get active.

## What can you do indoors?

- **PUT ON SOME LIVELY MUSIC AND GET EVERYONE DANCING** (Mom and Dad too!) Or try a story-song such as *Going on a Bear Hunt* where the listeners perform each action described by the storyteller.
- **IF YOU HAVE A BASEMENT, TRY TO CLEAR AN AREA** where children can use riding toys, play ball hockey or roller skate. Perhaps an old mattress set on the floor of a bedroom or playroom could be a trampoline for young children to jump on.
- **CREATE AN OBSTACLE COURSE IN THE HOUSE.** Map out a route that has your kids crawling under the kitchen chairs, through a tunnel made of blankets, over the back of a couch, etc. Or play follow-the-leader.
- **USE PUBLIC FACILITIES.** If your community centre offers public skating or swimming at reasonable cost, this is an ideal time for a family excursion.



# What about sports?

Organized sports can help children develop skills, learn to work as a team, and have some fun as well- but too much focus on competition or winning will discourage many children. When adults put too much pressure on children to “perform” at sports, the activity becomes stressful rather than fun.

- Amanda’s son, Jay, signed up for soccer when he was seven. Even though the players were young, Amanda found the coach very concerned about winning games. The kids who weren’t the best players spent a lot of time sitting on the bench. Even before the end of the season, Jay was telling his mother he wanted to quit.

This year, Amanda found another soccer league in their community, where the emphasis is on learning to play rather than winning. The league rules insist that every player has the same amount of time on the field. Jay has a lot of fun playing soccer now, and wants to play again next year.



**Sometimes the best way to play sports is informally.**

Playing catch in the backyard, shooting baskets in the driveway with a few of the neighbourhood kids, getting a hockey game going in an empty parking lot or a backyard rink are all traditional ways to have fun with sports. These informal games can include players of all ages and all skill levels — from parents to preschoolers — and you can make up rules that suit you.



*"Our family plays something we call soccer-baseball. We invented it because some of the kids were too little to hit a ball with a bat," says Lenore, the mother of five children. "We use bases like in baseball, but the pitcher throws a soccer ball to the 'batter' who kicks it as hard as he can. The others try to catch the ball and tag the batter as he runs around the bases. Adults and kids love it — even the little ones can play if they can kick the ball and run."*

# The Electronic Screen

## Life in the digital lane

Television, video games, DVD's and the internet are a fact of life for most Canadian families. The time that children spend in front of various screens seems to increase each year. Most parents realize that too much "screen time" is not good for kids, but it's a challenge to find workable ways to limit TV, video games and computer time.

### The two sides of TV

**TV can be educational and inexpensive fun.** Snuggling on the sofa with your children to watch a favourite family show can be a relaxing way to spend time together.

**But TV can also model aggressive or stereotyped behaviour, and it can bombard kids with advertisements for everything from junk food to trashy toys.** When kids spend long hours in

front of the television or computer, it can also contribute to obesity and stifle creativity. As one mother put it, "If my kids are watching TV they are not reading, they're not getting exercise outdoors, and they're not playing a game. That's why we restrict viewing in our house."



*"We've made up 'TV tickets' in our house. At the beginning of each week, Marina and Arturo each get 12 tickets worth a half hour each. If they want to watch a show, they have to hand in a ticket. If they watch a show together, they each need a ticket. They watch less TV now and they choose more carefully."*

# Taming the tube

**Each family needs to find its own way to manage the television.** Here are some good ideas to get you started:

- **SET A GOOD EXAMPLE.**

Demonstrate to your child that TV is not the only way to entertain yourself indoors! Let her see you reading, making a craft, baking or writing letters. When possible, invite her to join you. Don't sacrifice other activities for the sake of a TV show.

- **CHECK THE TIME.** Be aware of how much time your children spend watching TV, and set reasonable limits.

- **CHOOSE MEANINGFUL**

**PROGRAMS.** Look for shows that are linked to your child's other interests: sports, animals, a hobby or a hero. Watch with your children sometimes and discuss what you've seen.

- **KNOW WHAT THEY ARE WATCHING.** As children get older, they need to make more of their own choices about what to watch. However, you may still decide that some shows are "off limits".

- **RAISE A CRITIC.** Help you child to form judgements about program content and commercials. Ask questions: "Do you believe that the toy really flies like the ad says it does?" "If someone was hit like that in real life, what do you think would happen?"

- **DISCOURAGE "PASSIVE" VIEWING.** Don't leave the TV on as "background". When your child asks to watch TV, ask: "What show do you want to watch?"



*"We have a simple rule about TV: You can't surf the channels! Each Saturday, the kids look through the TV section of the newspaper, and circle the shows they want to watch that week. Everyone watches less TV this way, and the quality of what we watch is much better."*

## DVD's: A TV alternative

Many parents prefer DVD's to television because they are commercial-free and can run on the family's schedule, not the TV networks'. Still, DVD's are TV time, too. **If you decide to limit the number of hours per week that your child watches TV, be sure to include DVD's.**

- Jeremy's father strongly encourages him to take breaks when watching DVD's. Instead of a popcorn intermission, how about a walk? Or a trip to the park?

# Venturing Into Cyberspace

## Children and the Internet

Television, movies and video games still dominate screen time for children ten and under. But at this age, kids are starting to use the Internet for playing games, reading about celebrities, social networking and research for school projects. And as they get older their use of the Internet will increase, so now is a good time to start thinking about how to monitor and influence your children's Internet use.

Internet use comes with many of the same concerns as overuse of TV and video games. There are also some safety concerns that are unique to the internet such as exposure to undesirable sites, downloading viruses or spyware and possible exposure to internet predators.

### **Here are some guidelines for safe use of the internet:**

- Keep your children's Internet computer in a central location where you see what they are doing and supervise them.
- When your children want to use the Internet, ask what they are planning to do. Check out new sites with them before they go on those sites by themselves.
- Set clear limits on Internet use. Consider using parental control software to screen out undesirable sites.
- Pay attention to who your children may be communicating with online. Younger children are less likely than teenagers to connect with strangers online, but it still happens and probably will happen at some point. Teach kids never to share personal information real name, address, phone number, or passwords with people they meet online.
- Insist that your children never download programs, click on free offers or contests, or buy anything online without checking with you first.
- Tell your children to ask for help if they want to use a site that requires them to create a profile.

## From car chases to math drills: video and computer games

Video game titles come in lots of varieties: simulation, sports, strategy and educational. Many, however, do emphasize shooting or other kinds of





killing, so make sure you know what a game is like before you buy.

**While most children enjoy video games, parents should be aware that some kids find it hard to handle the stimulation — and frustration — of these games.**

- The speedy action of his favourite game makes Patrick racy and irritable for up to 30 minutes after he stops playing. His parents have learned to turn off the set well before bedtime! For most kids the novelty of a video game wears off in time. Gaming, however, can be addictive for some children.
- Linda's parents have set up the video system in the family room, so they're aware of how much she uses it. If it were hidden away in Linda's room, her parents know she would spend many hours gaming.

**Computer games offer a broader range of topics, many of them educational.** Deciding which software programs to try may be a difficult decision as the selection is vast. Don't be afraid to ask other parents or teachers which computer games they recommend. Kids can make greeting cards, "paint" pictures, or research dinosaurs, right on their home computer. As with any electronic gadget, be aware of what your child is playing with, and monitor whether he is avoiding school work or outdoor play in favour of mouse and keyboard!



*"Serena really likes playing the math games, and her arithmetic skills are definitely stronger now. I think it's a good way to supplement her school work."*

# Free Play and Organized Play

Variety is the spice of life

**While there is a place for school, soccer games and trumpet lessons, don't forget that children need to have unstructured play time, too.** Many parents are concerned about the way social changes have altered children's play. Children rarely "just go outside to play." They have planned play dates, take classes, or attend preschool. There's very little time to just be a kid.

**Free play allows the child to choose his own activities, and to follow his own interests.** A child might spend two hours building a single structure from a construction set, or he might go from digging in the sand to painting to playing tag with some friends.

This is the most "playful" kind of play. Whatever activity he chooses to pursue, indulge your child's need for free play or "down" time. Just like an adult, a child needs a little R and R, if only to daydream and recharge his batteries.

**Organized play is governed by adult rules.** It can include minor sports, activities in nursery school, day care or school, or group lessons. These types of extracurricular activities are great for teaching children the importance of working together as a team, building skills they will put to good use throughout their lives.



*"Because Steve loved swimming at the cottage, I figured he'd enjoy taking swimming lessons. But he hated them and dropped out after a couple of weeks. What he loved was just playing in the water, splashing around, diving to see what he could find. He didn't care about learning swimming skills — he just wanted to have fun."*

Many of these children will enjoy and even have fun during these activities but they shouldn't be allowed to replace a child's "free" play times.

## How can you give your child more unstructured time?

- **EASE UP.** If your child is in school or daycare fulltime, you might want to reduce or eliminate other organized activities. No more than one lesson during the week and a second one on the weekend is a good rule for many young children.
- **TURN OFF THE TUBE.** TV, video games and computer games can also eat up unstructured play time, and you can help by putting time limits on these activities.
- **JOIN IN.** Relax with your child, play catch together, let him lead you into his fantasy world.



Time for reflection, kids, just like adults, need a chance to do "nothing at all". It gives them an opportunity to unwind and relieve stress.

# A healthy balance

Here's a typical day for Ellen. She wakes up at 6:30am, gets dressed and has breakfast. Her Dad drops her off at the before-school daycare program by 7:45 and an hour later she joins her classmates in her regular class. When school ends at noon, Ellen is picked up by one of the staff at her daycare, and taken to a nearby centre. She stays there until one of her parents picks her up at 6:00, and then they go home for supper.



*"Jacob's such a sociable little guy that once both his older brothers were in school full time he got pretty cranky at home. He kept complaining about having nobody to play with. So I found a nursery school where he could go two mornings a week, and that seemed to put him back in balance."*

On Wednesday nights she has a skating lesson, and on Thursdays she takes part in Brownies. The weekends are busy too, as Ellen accompanies her parents on their many errands, from the grocery store to the laundromat.

What Ellen doesn't have in her busy schedule is much time for the solitary, imaginative kind of play that she loves.

"At home, Ellen will spend hours playing with her dolls and collections," her father Leo says. "I know she gets to play at school and at daycare, but that's always with other kids around and wanting to be involved. She likes to have time alone."

## How can you help your child's play repertoire be a balanced one?

- **RESPECT YOUR CHILD'S TEMPERAMENT.** Ellen's parents understand how important her solitary play is to her, and try not to interrupt when she's immersed in a pretend game. Some children are quieter and need more individual play, some are more sociable and want to play with friends. After school, David relaxes by drawing or painting; Lisa likes to spend those after-school hours playing sports.
- **PROVIDE VARIETY.** Remember that even if your child is naturally drawn to a certain type of play, he or she should have opportunities for other kinds of play as well. The quiet child also needs to be active; the social butterfly also needs some time to play alone.
- **BE PREPARED TO MAKE CHANGES AS YOUR CHILD GROWS.** This summer, Jared may be most interested in building backyard forts and defending them from imaginary invaders, but next summer he might be ready to join a baseball team.

# Hurray for Play

## A window of opportunity

Take some time to watch your child at play. Notice how absorbed he is in what he is doing, how much he enjoys the process without worrying about what the end result will be.

Watch your child as she plays with her friend — negotiating their roles, making up rules, and then dissolving in laughter just because they are having fun together.

We can all learn a lot from watching children play. A little more play might do a lot to balance our own stressful lives. That's true for all adults, but as a parent, you have a special advantage. You have children to teach you, and to lead you into their playful worlds. Go ahead, open the door to new adventures. You won't be disappointed by what awaits you. Whether it's a world of pirates and princesses, or arts and crafts, the land of play promises to be both a rewarding and exciting experience you will cherish for years to come. All you have to do is follow your child's lead.



# The Power of play:

## A quick review



Playing is a vital part of childhood. Through different kinds of play, children begin to develop skills that will remain important through out their lives:

- Imagination and creativity
- Social skills and friendships
- Hand-eye co-ordination and fine-motor skills
- Large-motor skills
- Logic, memory and problem-solving
- Skills for coping with stress
- Concentration and self-discipline



Children's play gradually changes as their bodies develop and their minds mature. It's important to remember, however, that all children grow at their own pace and have their own ways of playing.



As children grow, friendships become more significant. New friends expand our kids' worlds, exposing them to different games and styles of play. Social skills blossom as friends learn to negotiate, to take turns and to share.



Play is a natural way to have fun with your child. Besides creating wonderful memories together, playing with your child helps to build and strengthen your relationship.



While sports and lessons can be fun, children also need free time when they can control their own play. One of the best things we can do for our children is to make sure they have enough time and opportunity for play.

# PARENTING FOR LIFE

The success of tomorrow's world depends largely on how we live in it today. Building strong, healthy families is key to our future and the right information at the right time can be a vital support for growing families. Education and skills that enable parents and children to play and grow together, are the foundation we need to give flight to our future. That's what Parenting for Life is all about.

Strong Minds Strong Kids and Today's Parent Group originally joined efforts, with the support of Kodak Canada Inc., to develop Parenting for Life, a non-profit public education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. The resources, including booklets, a Facilitator's Guide for parent educators and posters are used as a part of many parent education programs in Canada. In 1998, Parenting for Life received the FRP Canada Media Award for the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs.

Research clearly demonstrates that a strong and healthy parent-child relationship is crucial to raising resilient, productive and mentally healthy individuals. Family by family, we need to strengthen our efforts and create a better world for our children. Please join us in this unique initiative.

Dr. Ester Cole, PhD., C.Psych  
Chair, Parenting for Life Program and Past Chair  
Strong Minds Strong Kids



PSYCHOLOGY CANADA



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