

Importance of Play in Children's Development

By Danielle Dietz, MA, CCC-SLP and Emmy Lustig

Play is critical for children's development because it provides time and space for children to explore and gain skills needed for adult life. Children's playtime has steadily decreased due to limited access to play spaces, changes in the way children are expected to spend their time, parent concerns for safety, and digital media use. Between 1981 and 1997, the amount of time children spent playing dropped by 25 percent.¹ During this same time period, children ages 3-11 lost 12 hours a week of free time and spent more time at school, completing homework, and shopping with parents.²

Play can be defined as "any spontaneous or organized activity that provides enjoyment, entertainment, amusement or diversion."³ When children play, they engage with their environment in a safe context in which ideas and behaviors can be combined and practiced. Children enhance their problem solving and flexible thinking, learn how to process and display emotions, manage fears and interact with others.⁴ Free, unstructured play allows children to practice making decisions without prompted instructions or the aim of achieving an end goal. They can initiate their own freely chosen activities and experiment with open-ended rules.

Social changes and new technologies have greatly impacted the way children play and the amount of free time they are given. Children's playtime continues to decrease as a result of:

- Emphasis on academic preparation at an early age-30% of American kindergarteners no longer have recess.¹
- Electronic media replacing playtime- 8-10 year olds spend nearly 8 hours a day engaging with different media, and 71% of children and teenagers have a TV in their bedroom⁵
- Less time spent playing outside-a study following young children's play found that kids under 13 years old sometimes spend less than 30 minutes a week outside.
- Perceived risk of play environments-in one study, 94% of parents cited safety concerns, e.g. street traffic and stranger danger, as a factor influencing where their children's play.¹
- Limited access to outdoor play spaces-only 20% of homes in the U.S. are located within a half-mile of a park.¹

As a result of reduced playtime, children are spending less time being active, interacting with other children, and building essential life skills, such as executive functioning skills, that they will use as adults.⁶ During well-child visits, healthcare professionals can inquire about children's playtime and media usage, and provide suggestions to promote quality playtime. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends health professionals pick two targeted questions to ask parents at well-child visits such as:

1. The number of hours the child spends engaged in screen time
2. Whether there are digital devices in the child's bedroom.⁵

Children's play behaviors may vary based on cultural norms and family preferences. While some cultures emphasize individualism and independent play, others engage in more parent-directed play and activities. This can influence how children play with toys and interact with their peers and family members.⁷ To help provide

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advice to families with different values, styles of play, and communication, health professionals can offer these recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics:

- Allow for 1 hour a day of unstructured, free play⁵
- Limit child's media time to less than 1 to 2 hours a day
- No media usage for children under 2
- Establish "Screen free zones" by keeping TVs, computers and video games out of children's bedrooms
- Limit "background media" use during playtime and family activities because it is distracting for children and adults
- Establish a plan for media use, e.g. when and where media is used and length of time child uses media

For more tips on how to encourage children's play time check out this [free brochure](#).

About Pathways.org:

[Pathways.org](#) is a national not-for-profit dedicated to maximizing children's development by providing free tools and resources for medical professionals and families. To help parents learn about important topics in development and milestones for their child, Pathways.org provides free supplemental materials for well child visits and parent classes. View our [new play brochure](#) here to access information created for parents on the importance of children's play.

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