



Benefits of play – what does the evidence say?

fact sheet

“We don’t stop playing when we get old, we get old when we stop playing.”
George Bernard Shaw

Life is so busy and so full of ‘shoulds’ and ‘musts’. In usual times we rely on routines – but routines can turn into ruts. We eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep, work on repeat. Taking time to have fun, be silly and play are often way down the list of priorities – who has time for that? During times of crisis and overwhelm, being playful can feel even more inaccessible, even irresponsible. However, research has suggested that playing can be essential for physical and mental health, and can nurture growing competencies in physical coordination, social interactions, executive function and relationship cohesion (Milteer, Ginsburg and Council On Communications And Media; Committee On Psychosocial Aspects Of Child And Family Health, 2012; Ginsburg, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications; American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2007).

The history of language links the English word ‘play’ to the old English word, *pleg(i)an* ‘to exercise’ or *plega* ‘brisk movement’ which is, in turn related to Middle Dutch *pleien* ‘leap for joy, dance’ (OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/145474. Accessed 17 September 2021). ‘Play’ has been defined as engagement in an activity for enjoyment and recreation or for its own sake. Playing a game of tennis, telling jokes, building a Lego model or dancing to a favourite tune are all examples of playing. The idea of playing is intimately connected to physical states, and honours the values of joy and creativity.

For several decades now research has confirmed a relationship between play and multiple health benefits. Jann Panskepp, a highly revered neuroscientist, linked mammalian play behaviours to core neurological structures including the midbrain, thalamus, and cortex, also suggesting that neurotransmitters such as acetylcholine, glutamate, and opioids were enhanced in playful activity. These neurotransmitters are also implicated in cognitive development, memory and feelings of pleasure. (Panskepp, 2004). Recently published findings from the ‘PLAY Spaces & Environments for Children’s Physical Activity’ (PLAYCE) study in WA link regular active play with a family pet with increased likelihood of child prosocial behaviours (Wenden, Lester, Zubrick et al, 2021) and another study from Spain linked increased exposure to regular play with improved physical health benefits (Sánchez-López, Menor-Rodríguez, Sánchez-García et al, 2020)

The Harvard Centre for the Developing Child has developed the concept of ‘serve and return’ in parental interactions with infants and kids to encourage play and links this to optimal brain development. It goes like this – a child makes a bid for connection (a serve) through bringing a toy to their parent, or taking their parent’s hand and guiding them to the swings at the local playground. If a parent can respond by noticing the bid, entering into play acting, or offering to push the swing and vocalise some joy they have engaged in a ‘return’. This opens up a space for interactive, imaginative and creative play together.



Research shows this builds brain architecture and enhances the development of executive function (see <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resourcetag/play/>).

At times of distress, tension and fear it is normal for the human species to prioritise survival at the expense of what may seem pointless or silly. Research shows that taking time to be silly, laugh together or enjoy a game of rough and tumble isn't a waste of time – indeed it could be one of the most fun and accessible ways to build physical and emotional health!

References:

Ginsburg, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications; American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, “The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds” in *Pediatrics*, 2007 January, Volume 119, number 1, pp. 182-91.

Milteer, Ginsburg and Council On Communications And Media; Committee On Psychosocial Aspects Of Child And Family Health. “The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: focus on children in poverty.” In *Pediatrics*, 2012, January, Volume 129, number 1, pp. 204-13.

OED Online, Oxford University Press, September 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/145474. Accessed 17 September 2021.

Panksepp, Jaak. *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions*, Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2004.

Sánchez-López, Menor-Rodríguez, Sánchez-García et al. “Play as a Method to Reduce Overweight and Obesity in Children: An RCT.” In *International Journal for Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2020, Volume 17, pp. 346 – 56.

Wenden, Lester, Zubrick et al. “The relationship between dog ownership, dog play, family dog walking, and pre-schooler social–emotional development: findings from the PLAYCE observational study.” In *Pediatric Research*, 2021, Volume 89, pp 1013 – 19.

Author: Dr Alice Dwyer BA(Hons) MBBS(Hons) MPsyh FRANZCP