

Daily Union Article
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Title: The Importance of Play

Think back to the youngest stage of your life that you can recollect. What are some of your most vivid memories? Now sort through the memories that come to mind and settle on one that involved play – playing a game, playing outside, playing with family or friends.

Dig a bit deeper into that memory and identify the details of the event using your five senses. How did the game feel? If it was playing trucks out in the dirt, perhaps you can remember the ground being gritty, soft, or muddy. What did it smell like? Did it have that typical earthy smell or perhaps it was close to a lilac bush where the fragrance from the blossoms overwhelmed any other odors. What did the ground look like? Perhaps you had been using this same location for months and nearly had an urban sprawl of roadways or perhaps it was just a single lane “back road.”

Typically childhood memories that remain stronger in our mind were ones where multiple senses were used in the process of our play. Play is critical to the developing brain and is also instrumental to the learning process. Play is one of the most essential activities for a baby to engage in as part of their healthy development.

During the early years, babies’ brains develop connections at a very high and frequent rate. As certain connections are used and reused, the connection becomes stronger and branch out to form into more complex networks of connections. When connections are not “exercised” they become weak and eventually get “pruned” from the network. However, when connections are used multiple times, they become stronger.

Play gives babies and young children the opportunity to exercise connections repeatedly. As they experience new things and practice the actions or skills they have already developed, their network of brain connections become stronger.

What an adult may see as a silly or meaningless action is, in reality, a learning experience for the child. Instead of dismissing these actions, take some time to watch them closely. You will see that babies who are playing are actually practicing complex and important skills.

Exploring: During play, babies and children use their senses to explore their environment. They may hold a rattle close to their eyes to observe its shape and colors, repeatedly drop the toy from a high chair to hear the sound it makes, or even put the rattle in their mouth to feel it on their gums and tongue. This is part of how they learn.

Testing: Much like an adult who begins their test drive of a new car by touching the panel to see what controls the various electronic gadgets, babies explore through testing

their surroundings. Perhaps they kick at the floor toy as they lay on their back, drop a set of toy keys outside of a play pen, or smear the mashed potatoes on the tray of their high chair. By experimenting with the stimuli in their environment, they begin to figure out cause and effect and how different objects work.

Practicing and Expanding: When a baby tries a new action or skill, they commonly repeat it over and over until it is perfected. Think of how they learn to pull out or replace a pacifier in their mouth. It takes a lot of practice and perhaps even a few tears of frustration before they master that skill. Sometimes a child will “accidentally” learn a new skill or discover something new as a result of an action they displayed. For example, they may realize that the crayon they are playing with leaves a mark when they push it down on the surface in front of them. They repeat the action and through practice, the accidental discovery leads to stronger brain connections that lend themselves to other new discoveries.

Decision Making: Care givers must offer a safe and engaging environment in which children can play. Since play is a child-directed activity, a child will decide the “what” and “how” of play. They decide if they want to join in play with another person, or if they want to play alone. They decide how long they want to play with an object and when they are ready to switch activities. These types of decisions give babies and children confidence and prepares them for their future developmentally appropriate decisions.

Role-Playing: Children love to engage in pretend play. This gives them the chance to mimic the roles of people they are around or those they have seen in passing. Pretend play gives them the chance to explore being “momma” or “daddy”; a firefighter or teacher; or any variety of a number of role models they have seen. Through this experience they begin to recognize that different people see things and do things differently.

Coping Skills: Play is fun, but often stressful for babies and children. The game may not go the way they want it to or they may not be able to figure out how to get the pacifier in their mouth when they want it there. Play helps children make sense of stressful situations. By encountering these challenges, they discover and practice coping skills and build a stronger capacity to manage their responses.

As a child grows, learns, and matures their decisions about play change. The brain's connections become stronger and denser as the brain's networks are built into a more complex system. Parents are instrumental in making “play” an enriching and productive part of everyday life for their children. In next week's article, I'll offer some tips on how you can promote play with your baby, child, or grandchildren. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!