

# Why Play for Young Children?

In our work-oriented society, play often has a negative meaning.

"Quit playing around."

"You're wasting your time playing."

"Playboy."

These are all expressions that show our lack of respect for play. But if we look closely, we will find that play is the central activity of young children. It is play that enables children to grow socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically to their maximum potential.

## The Value of Play for Social Development

The young child is not born with the ability to "get along" with others or to cooperate in activities of give and take. This skill of "learning to live and work with others" begins first as *isolated play*, exploring the parents' faces and bodies with their own body, and exploring and manipulating toys and objects (ages 0-2½). This is followed by *parallel play*, which can be seen when older toddlers play side by side, each doing a similar imitative activity, such as washing dolls, but without true communication or cooperation.

The next stage of play, near age three, is *cooperative play*, in which the children work on one task, sharing materials. Two children might build a garage with blocks or work together to create a sand city. Later, after much experience with other children, we begin to see the development of highly valued *sociodramatic play*. This is the dress-up and make-believe role play that adults find so appealing during the preschool to kindergarten years (ages 3-7).

Young children learn to understand social roles through role playing mommy, daddy, doctor, grocer or fire fighter.

Finally, near the beginning of middle childhood (ages 7-11) and the beginning of formal schooling, the child acquires the ability to play *games-with-rules*. These include competitive games (sports and board games) and mental games (word games and those often played in the car while traveling).

## The Value of Play for Emotional Development

Young children, whose language is limited, are better able to express their feelings and understand their world through play rather than complicated words. The child who has had a highly emotional negative experience (trip to the dentist) or positive experience (birthday party) can retreat to his or her play world and play out "dentist" or "birthday". This replaying in the safe world of play allows the child to digest both pleasurable and unpleasant experiences, to better understand them, and to begin to gain some control over his or her feelings related to the emotional experiences.

## The Value of Play for Intellectual Development

Learning is not a simple process of "putting information into" the child and then having the child "put it out". The child must play with the new information in order to understand it. Children use toys and gestures symbolically in play as attempts to understand objects and experiences in their real world.



The symbols seen in children's play and artworks indicate the development of the ability to use representation (one thing stands for another). Just as a block can symbolize or represent a truck for the four- or five-year-old child, the letters *c-a-t* will represent the animal that says "meow" to the older, schoolage child. The young child needs many experiences of playing with symbols (pretending the block is a CB radio) before he or she is ready to unlock the world of words (the letters *c-a-t* stand for the animal: cat), and this is required for success in beginning reading.

It is during the preschool years that the child is moving from the make-believe symbols in play in the world of words in reading and writing.

FOLLOWING EXPERIMENTATION WITH THE BASIC SCRIBBLES, CHILDREN WILL BEGIN TO LINK WHAT THEY KNOW, CREATE NEW SHAPES, NEW DESIGNS AND WILL PROCEED THROUGH THE FOLLOWING STAGES PRIOR TO CREATING REPRESENTATIONAL ART AND PRIOR TO WRITING:



CROSSES



COMBINATIONS - USING 2 SHAPES

IMPLIED DIAGRAMS AND SHAPES



AGGREGATES -  
3 OR MORE SHAPES



MANDALA - DIVIDING SPACE INTO EQUAL PARTS



SUNS



RADIALS



SUNS WITH FACES

HUMANOIDS

HUMANS

