Let Children Play

By: Pamela McCaskill, Ph.D.

The Importance of Unstructured Play for Children

Over my last 30 years as a child psychologist, things have changed a lot, but especially in the lives of young children. We live in a highly structured, fast-paced world. Children's days are often structured with one activity after another—school, sports, tutoring, etc. While these organized pursuits have their benefits, one critical component of child development is increasingly being overlooked: unstructured play. Unstructured play, also known as free play, is when a child has free time to follow their own interests and ideas without being guided. In previous generations, daycare, preschool and kindergarten were mostly safe unstructured playhouses for the early years of childhood. Now, I see the increased pressure to teach children reading, math and science and the rules of sports in the early years, thus reducing the benefits of unstructured play, an essential element for a child's overall development.



10 Benefits of Unstructured Play:

1. Fosters Creativity and Imagination

When children engage in unstructured play, their imaginations are free to develop with no limits. Unlike organized activities where there are specific rules and goals, free play allows kids to create their own worlds. A cardboard box can become a rocket ship, a castle, or a car. Children can invent games, characters, and scenarios, fostering creativity that structured activities often cannot. These moments of imaginative play are where children learn to think beyond the limits and solve problems in unique ways.

2. Improves Problem-Solving Skills

When the structure imposes by rules is taken away, children in unstructured play must make independent decisions. Whether they are figuring out how to build a fort with limited materials or negotiating roles in a game with friends, they are constantly solving problems. This process is the necessary base for developing critical thinking skills. Children learn to try out at idea, fail, adapt and revise their approach and try again—all essential components of resilience and cognitive flexibility.

3. Promotes Physical Activity

We can't seem to get away from the surge of and demand for screen time, but unstructured play gives children an opportunity to move their bodies naturally. Free play sets the stage for children to engage in physical activities like running, skipping, climbing, jumping, twirling and dancing. This allows fertile ground for the development of fine and gross motor skills, coordination, and overall physical health. Unlike scheduled sports, free play allows kids to move joyfully without pressure or expectations.

4. Encourages Social Skills and Cooperation

Unstructured play often happens with peers, whether it's at a playground, during recess, or with siblings. When children play freely with others, they must learn to communicate, negotiate, share, and resolve conflicts on their own. This kind of social interaction helps build crucial social and emotional skills. Without an adult directing the play, children have the chance to develop empathy, learn to compromise, and understand the perspectives of others. These experiences lay the foundation for healthy relationships throughout life.



5. Emotional Regulation Development

Free play provides children with a safe space to express all their emotions, navigate and work through frustrations, and manage stress (without needing to put it into words). Whether it's pretending to be a superhero or creating a storyline that mirrors their real-life feelings, unstructured play gives children an outlet to explore and manage their emotions. Over time, this helps children build emotional intelligence and self-regulation, which are key to managing stress and anxiety as they grow older.

6. Encourages Independence and Builds Confidence

When children are given the opportunity to direct their own play, they learn to trust their instincts and abilities. Unstructured play helps with independence, as children become more and more aware that they can entertain themselves, solve problems, and generate new ideas. This autonomy is necessary for developing self-confidence and a sense of competence. When a child successfully builds a fortress, conquers the playground jungle gym, or invents a new game, they feel a sense of pride and accomplishment that fosters confidence in their abilities.

7. Improves Attention and Focus

Although unstructured play often seems random and chaotic, it actually can help improve a child's ability to focus and concentrate. When children engage in play that they control, they become deeply absorbed in what they are doing. This self-directed focus is different from the concentration required in structured activities. Studies have shown that neurotypical children who engage in regular free play often develop better attention spans and are more capable of focusing on tasks when needed.

8. Supports Brain Development

Unstructured play isn't just fun—it's essential for brain development. During free play, children are constantly learning, even if it doesn't look like traditional education. They're testing boundaries, exploring cause and effect, developing language skills through storytelling, and honing spatial awareness. Neuroscientific research has shown that play can stimulate the development of neural pathways in the brain, helping children more efficiently process information that builds a foundation for lifelong learning.

9. Supports Risk-Taking and Resilience

To learn and grow, children need to take some risks. Unstructured play provides a great environment for healthy risk-taking. Whether it's attempting to climb a higher tree, experimenting with a new game, or building a taller tower, free play allows children to push their boundaries in a safe space. Learning how to assess risks, deal with failures, and try again builds resilience. When children encounter challenges in free play and work through them it transfers into confidence to handle setbacks in other areas of life.

10. Reduces Stress and Enhances Overall Well-being

Children today are often busy with scheduled activities, with little downtime to relax and unwind. Unstructured play provides a break from the stress of school, homework, and other extracurricular activities. It allows children to release pent-up energy and process the day's events. Studies show that children who engage in regular free play are less likely to experience anxiety and stress long term. The freedom to play without specific goals or expectations helps children relax and enjoy being in the moment, leading to improved mental health and well-being.

Many of us seem to be surrounded by people and activities that value productivity and structure and find it difficult to find space for unstructured play. However, research and experience show that free play is one of the most valuable opportunities we can offer our children. So, let children play freely. Whether they're building forts in the backyard, exploring the woods, or simply daydreaming, these moments of free play are where the magic of childhood—and essential learning—truly happen.