

Why Your Child Needs to Play!



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Why Are We Talking About This?

Young children are joyful creatures who were born to play. Indeed, play is a *biological drive* for the young of almost all animals, human animals included!

Sadly, rather than being joyful and playful, these days young children are too often anxious, depressed, and frustrated. Dr. Peter Gray contends this is the result of the decline in play they're experiencing.

And why are children no longer playing the way nature intended? Because there are so many myths circulating throughout society these days – many of them related to what it takes to raise “successful” children.

Among those myths, perhaps the worst is the belief that “earlier is better.” Whether we’re discussing academics or athletics, you’ve been led to believe that if your child doesn’t get a jumpstart on either of these, s/he will fall hopelessly behind and remain that way.

Trust me, it’s a myth! Children who begin something when they’re developmentally ready – for example, reading or sports participation – usually catch up to, and often



Surpass, those who began before they were developmentally equipped to do so!

Additionally, children who were encouraged to master skills before they were ready often learn to dislike those skills! It happens often with reading. And in the case of sports, 71% of children who started too early burn out and quit by age 13.

Along with others, the myth that earlier is better has given rise to the mistaken belief that play is not a productive use of time.

I don't know when *productivity* came to be associated with childhood. But I do know play is essential to this unique phase of the lifespan. There could be no more productive way for children to spend their time than by playing.

What Is Play?

Because play has so many facets, this is a challenging question to answer simply. Often, we think of it in terms of playing sports or playing video games. But those examples tend to be adult-initiated and adult-directed, which means their value often lies in such results as home runs, goals, and points scored.



But true play is child-initiated, child-directed, open-ended, and intrinsically motivated. It focuses on *process* rather than product (goals, points, etc.).

Process, for a young child, is simply *fun*. Process, as every early childhood professional is taught, is what matters most in the early years. Not product.

Play offers children a sense of control. In fact, it's the only time they're able to take control of their world. If they never have it their self-sufficiency may well suffer.



The Benefits of Play

In a short guide it's impossible to outline – let alone detail – all the benefits children accrue through play. Entire books – both academic and trade – have addressed the subject. (I'll recommend a few of the trade books later.)

Still, within this e-book I hope I can provide enough of an overview to help you understand how essential play is to your child's life – particularly her or his early life.



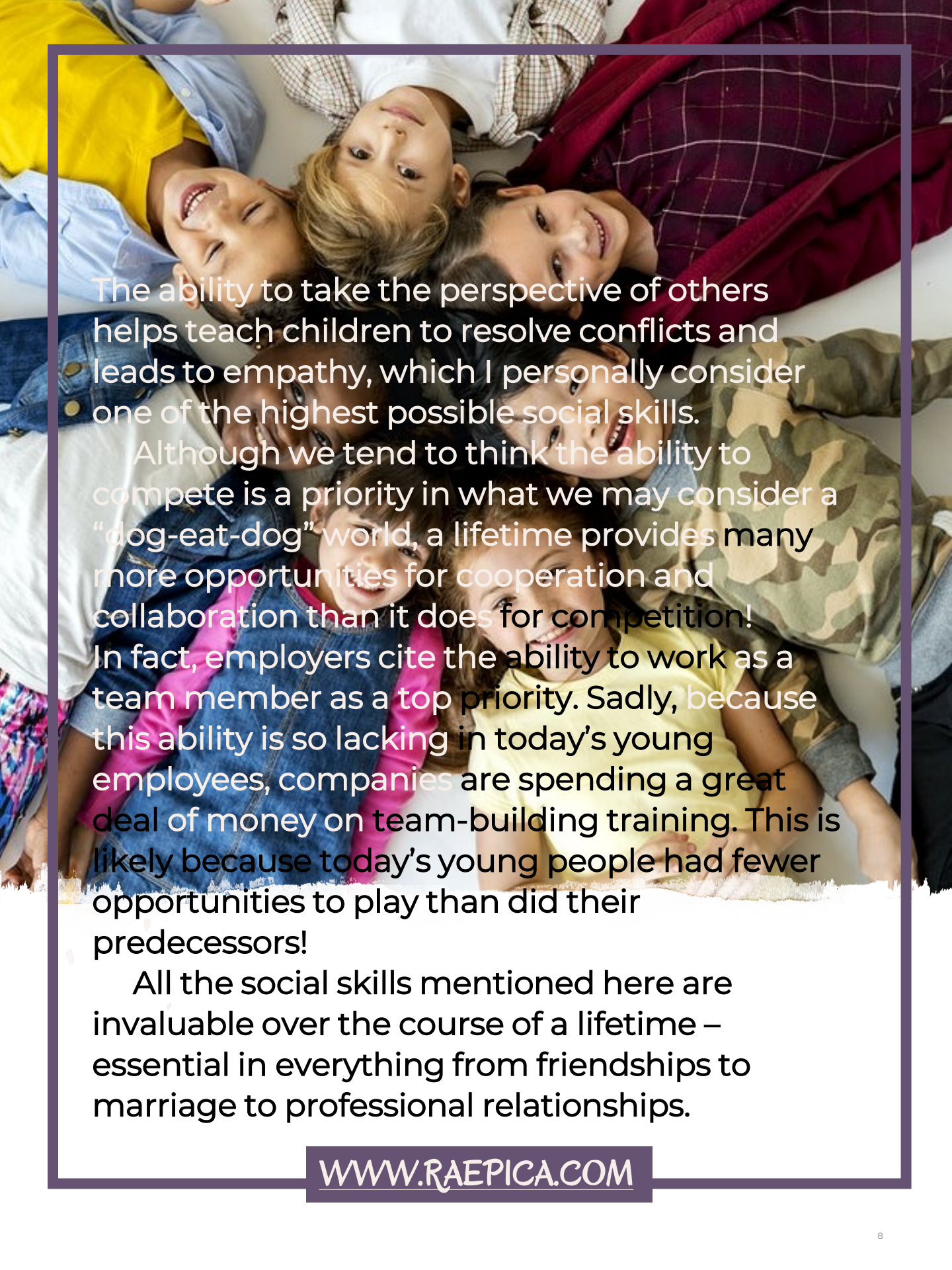


Building the Adult Personality

Experts agree that the adult personality is built on the child's play. In other words, all the skills children need to develop into functioning, productive adults originate from play, including the ability to

- share
- cooperate
- negotiate
- compromise
- make and revise rules
- take the perspective of others

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A group of diverse children, including boys and girls of various ethnicities, are lying on their stomachs on a light-colored surface. They are all looking up towards the camera with joyful expressions, some smiling broadly. They are wearing casual clothing like t-shirts, jeans, and a camouflage jacket. The image is framed by a dark purple border.

The ability to take the perspective of others helps teach children to resolve conflicts and leads to empathy, which I personally consider one of the highest possible social skills.

Although we tend to think the ability to compete is a priority in what we may consider a “dog-eat-dog” world, a lifetime provides many more opportunities for cooperation and collaboration than it does for competition! In fact, employers cite the ability to work as a team member as a top priority. Sadly, because this ability is so lacking in today’s young employees, companies are spending a great deal of money on team-building training. This is likely because today’s young people had fewer opportunities to play than did their predecessors!

All the social skills mentioned here are invaluable over the course of a lifetime – essential in everything from friendships to marriage to professional relationships.

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Play & Learning

Play is the tool that helps children understand themselves and the world around them – to make sense of their world.

As mentioned, nature designed children to learn much of what they need to know through play.

But there is perhaps no greater skill that your child can acquire than problem solving, which is an inherent part of play.

Whether it's conflict resolution, as previously mentioned, keeping a stack of blocks from falling over, fitting a round block into a square hole, or figuring out how to go higher on a swing, problem solving is required.



Divergent problem solving is especially critical, as it involves multiple solutions to any single challenge. This is in direct contrast to the lesson children learn from worksheets and standardized tests: that there's always going to be one correct response. But that's not representative of real life, is it?

As an example of divergent problem solving in children's play, cooperative musical chairs requires them to find a way to share the remaining chairs, even when there's just one. There will be various ways to achieve this. The children could all place a single hand, or a big toe, on the remaining chair. My favorite was when I saw one child sit and the remaining children link to him by holding hands and forming a human chain!

How about when a group of children are trying to get a toy vehicle out of the mud? Or when they want to build an indestructible sandcastle?

If we think about how much has changed in just the last few decades, we can agree that we can't know what the future will look like. That's why problem solving is one of the only skills we can be certain children are going to need!



A physiological fact...

Moderate- to vigorous-
intensity physical play
feeds the brain the
nutrients it needs to
perform optimally!

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The Power of Pretend Play

Closely related to problem solving is the ability to see beyond what exists – to imagine! Both are part of creativity. And while many believe creativity is the realm of artists alone, we need creativity in business, medicine, science, technology, and many, many facets of life.

Playfulness and creativity go hand in hand. In creativity workshops parents and teachers asked to choose words describing either creativity or play find many terms common to both. They include such words as *fun*, *spontaneous*, *imaginative*, and *confidence-building*. In early childhood, creativity, like play, is process- as opposed to product-oriented.

Today, with the ever-present, ready-made images available to our children via television and computers, the imagination may be in even greater danger of extinction than at any other time in history. But with new challenges facing us almost daily it has perhaps never been more needed.

Make-believe play has been linked to self-

regulation skills, which in turn have been linked to greater academic success than IQ has. Self-regulation skills also help children with self-control and with managing stress while learning.

One of play's most important roles is that it helps children express their thoughts and feelings and to deal with stress. To cope with fears they can't yet understand or

"Beyond individual development, creativity advances civilization and society by addressing and attempting to solve the global problems of hunger, poverty, disease, war, and pollution."

~ Robert Schirrmacher

articulate.

These days you find a lot of children playing “Covid.” When the twin towers came down, children were building block towers and knocking them down. It’s the only way they know to cope and to find some control in their lives.



Noted early childhood educator Nancy Carlsson-Paige asks: If they don’t express their feelings through play, where do those feelings go?

As frightening as it is, the answer may be: to prison. Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, went to prisons to interview inmates and found that the most violent among them were those who never played as children.

Play & Physical Development

Call it *physical activity*. Call it *movement*. Call it *active* or *physical play*. Whatever we call it, there are plenty of excellent reasons that children should be engaging in it!

I realize that physical skills are not given the same respect as, say, literacy or numeracy skills. But certainly, your child's body has value to *you*!

We now have a growing understanding of how physical activity affects the musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, respiratory, and endocrine systems. More specifically, physical activity benefits health in the following ways:

- Reduces the risk of dying prematurely
- Reduces the risk of dying from heart disease
- Helps reduce blood pressure
- Reduces the risk of developing colon cancer
- Helps control weight
- Increases the body's infection-fighting white blood cells and germ-fighting antibodies
- Improves aerobic endurance, muscle growth, muscular strength, motor coordination, and growth stimulation of the heart, lungs, and other vital organs
- Helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints.

A young child with light-colored hair, wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and striped pants, is sitting on a dark-colored couch. The child is looking off to the right side of the frame. In the background, there is a large lamp with a dark, teardrop-shaped base and a light-colored shade. To the right of the lamp, there is a stack of books or papers on a surface. The overall lighting is warm and indoor.

This is some of what we're seeing, thanks to the sedentary lifestyles children are leading these days.

- 40% of 5- to 8-year-olds show at least one heart disease risk factor, including obesity and hypertension.
- The first signs of arteriosclerosis are appearing at age 5.
- Children ages 6 to 10 are dying of sudden cardiopulmonary arrest.

Low levels of activity and fitness cause an estimated 300,000 deaths a year in the U.S. alone. The good news is that this is fixable! We just need to make sure the children get to *move*!

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But there's still more!

Because today's children have so few opportunities to spin, swing, hang upside down, jump, run and change directions, and the like, they are falling out of their seats in school!



One first-grade teacher counted, and in just a week it happened 44 times!

This might not seem like such a big deal. But it's a clear indication that the proprioceptive and vestibular systems are not being developed as nature intended.

Proprioception is awareness of the location of one's body and body parts in relation to the environment. With a properly developed proprioceptive sense, children can perform such tasks as feeding themselves without having to watch their fork travel to their mouth or climb a staircase without looking at their feet. The vestibular sense detects gravity and motion to create an internal sense of balance. It coordinates with the other senses to help a person get upright

and stay that way. With a properly developed vestibular sense, children will have, among other things, better balance, visual tracking, and self-regulation.

The critical period for development of these senses is before the age of 7, and the way they're developed is through the kinds of movement cited on the last page.

I know you worry about your child's safety. But if he or she is to develop the way nature intended, we adults must stop saying things such as:

- "Don't run!" (which I once heard a mom say to a child running uphill on grass!)
- "Don't spin; you'll get dizzy."
- "Don't hang like that; all the blood will rush to your head."

These are *exactly* the kinds of activities children are supposed to be experiencing!

"Risky" play rarely takes place on public or school playgrounds these days. Swings, monkey bars, and those wonderful, dizzying merry-go-rounds have all been removed. And tag, running, and cartwheels, among other necessary-for-development actions, have been banned at many schools. What we must remember is that *this interferes with the human development nature intended!*

And, of course, we can't forget the importance of kids as competent movers.

Like other skills acquired in the early years, movement skills need to be taught and practiced if they're to be mastered. Although it seems motor skills miraculously appear and develop on their own, the fact is, children who don't receive instruction and practice in this area will develop only marginal – as opposed to maximal – ability to use their bodies.



It only makes sense. Just as children acquire a vocabulary of words to use throughout a lifetime, they likewise acquire and develop a “movement vocabulary” consisting of fundamental locomotor (traveling), nonlocomotor (stationary), and manipulative (object-control) skills they can use for current and future physical activity. And just as we would never expect a child's language

development to mature without help from us and without practice talking – and talking and talking – we can't expect movement skills to mature fully without assistance and without their moving...

and moving and moving.

It's important to remember that individuals who feel competent and confident when moving will most likely continue moving throughout life, taking part in lifelong physical activity and achieving all the health benefits it has to offer.

Adolescents and adults who haven't acquired and mastered fundamental movement skills are the ones who shy away from physical activity because the movements required feel unnatural and overly strenuous; learning them at an older age is much more challenging. And the fear of failing and looking foolish is a powerful deterrent.

Research has found that children without the ability to execute basic motor skills are three times more sedentary than skilled children! And, because children judge themselves – and others – by their movement ability, children who move well simply have a better view of themselves – and each other – overall.

Early childhood professionals tell me stories that make me want to weep about young children who can't walk a block without becoming exhausted. These are *children* – creatures typically capable of running up hills we adults have trouble *walking* up!

Play & Academics



Earlier, we looked at the role of play in learning in general. This section adds to that, but also looks at the acquisition of specific academic skills.

I realize many people believe the brain and body are separate entities and that the functions of the brain are superior to the functions of the body. These misconceptions are the reasons why recess (sometimes a child's only opportunity for free play) is being eliminated in favor of more "instructional time."

However, this completely contradicts the vast body of research about the body's role in learning. Children learn best – and most authentically! – through play and movement.

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Filling out worksheets and memorizing facts and vocabulary words does *not* represent authentic learning. Nor do they provide evidence that anything was truly learned.

Eric Jensen, author of several books on brain-based learning, expresses it best when he describes intrinsic vs. extrinsic learning.

The former, he says, is like learning to ride a bike. The latter is like learning the capital of Peru. And he asks: Five years later, would you still be able to ride a bike? Five years later, would you still know the capital of Peru?

*"Learning is
experience.
Everything else is just
information."*

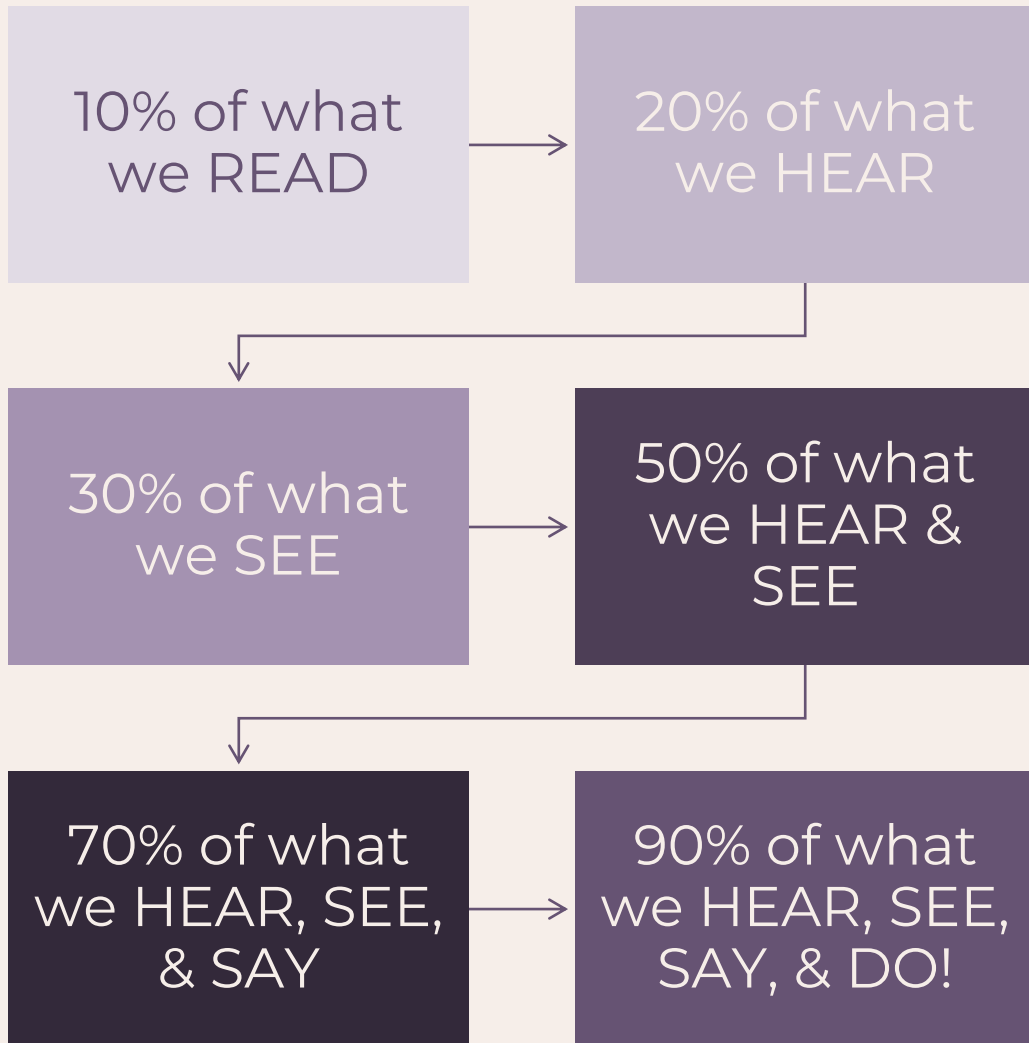
~ Albert Einstein

*"What I hear I forget.
What I see I
remember. What I do
I know."*

~ Confucius

As you'll see on the next page, the more senses an individual (but especially a child!) uses in the learning process, the more information s/he retains!

WE RETAIN...



Through play, children acquire literacy, mathematical, and scientific skills, among others. Following are some examples.



The four components of the language arts are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. While the latter two receive the most attention, the former two are critical to good communication and therefore to emergent literacy. When children play together – “You get on the swing and I’ll push” – they are practicing their listening and speaking skills.

When children sort objects by size and shape, they are discovering mathematical concepts. When they stack the objects, they’re learning about balance, a scientific principle.



Blowing bubbles involves lessons in flotation and gravity (science). Your child doesn't have to hear those words; s/he simply has to experience them at this stage!

Trying to catch the bubbles requires eye-hand coordination, which is essential to reading and writing (emergent literacy).

Chasing the bubbles also promotes development of large-muscles skills and cardiovascular endurance.

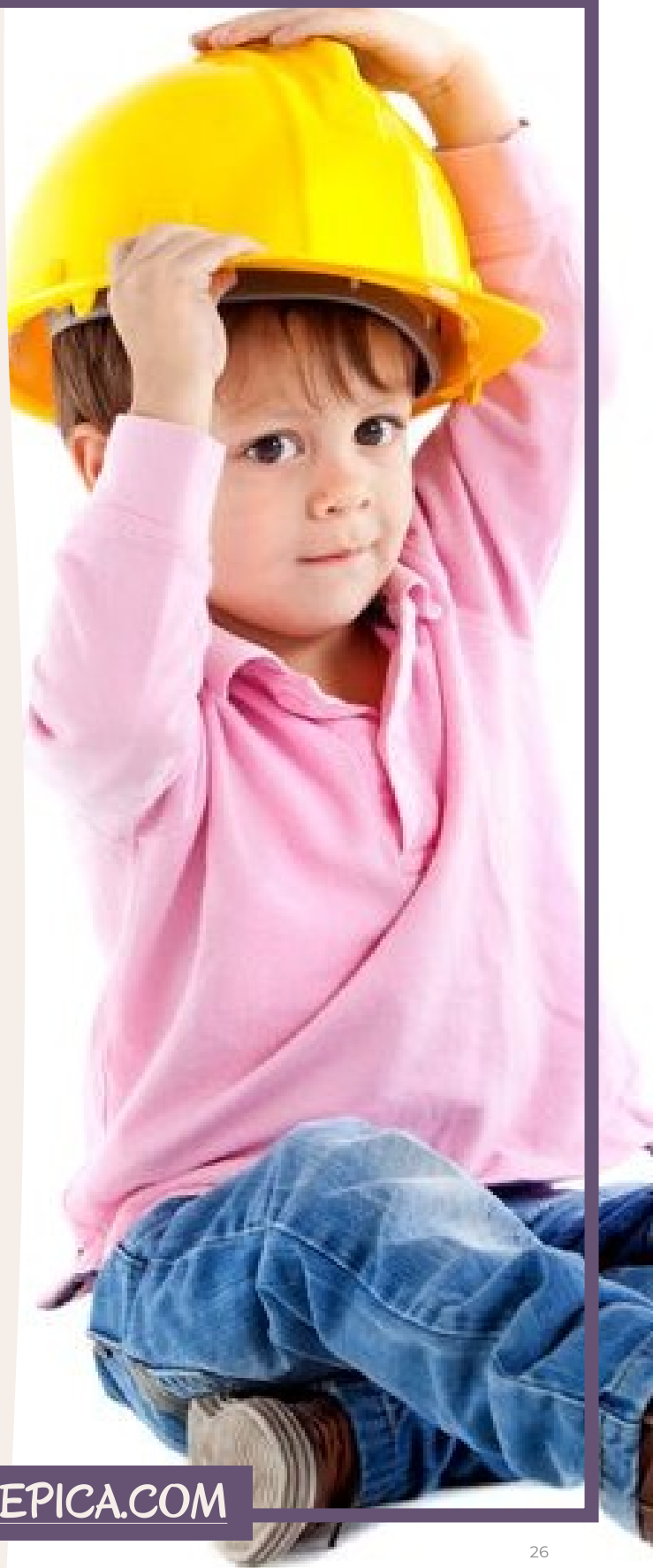


When children pretend to be construction workers, fire fighters, doctors, nurses, chefs, and so forth, they're developing their creative skills.

Additionally, they're expressing themselves and imagining the work involved in various occupations. This helps with the development of empathy.

If children are taking on these roles with other children, cooperation is also involved.

All of these are social studies concepts, and all help children learn to be part of a community – one of the most important lessons they can learn.



Swinging involves gravity and cause and effect, both scientific concepts. Again, your child doesn't yet need to hear these words associated with what's happening; s/he simply needs the chance to experience them.



The scientific principles of condensation and evaporation are involved when children "paint" the outside of the house with water.



Playing hopscotch provides experience with number recognition and counting (math concepts), while also offering practice with the locomotor skills of jumping and hopping.



I could offer pages and pages of examples, but I hope these few will get the idea across.

Back in the day, “learning” looked like what’s happening in this photo. So, it’s not unusual that many adults imagine learning takes place while sitting still.

All the current research proves this isn’t true. Unfortunately, too many decision makers also imagine this is how learning occurs and fail to pay attention to the wonderful research we have on how children learn best.

They may have the greatest say in what takes place in schools. But *you* determine what happens when your child is home! And now that you understand the importance of play, I hope you will also one day have significant say of what takes place in your child’s school as well!





“I look upon joy as the most powerful of all mental stimuli.”

~ Jaques-Dalcroze

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"I shouldn't have to defend play for children any more than I should have to defend their eating, sleeping, and breathing."

RAE PICA

Education Consultant



Conclusion

Imagine if we kept kittens, puppies, and baby goats from playing.

The idea is ludicrous! Because it's evident that nature created kittens, puppies, and baby goats – to name a few – to play. To run and jump and frolic. To practice the skills they'll require as they mature.

It should be just as ludicrous to keep children from playing! How can we believe we have a better plan than nature had?

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Ask yourself:

- Did I play as a child?
- What did I play?
- What did I learn by playing?





Finally, ask yourself how many times, as an adult, you've had to meet challenges and solve problems or use your sense of humor or playful attitude to save the day. I worry that if children don't learn to play as children, they aren't likely to discover its value as adults. And just think about what a dreary, deadening existence daily life will become without a playful attitude!

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

~ George Bernard Shaw

Resources



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Here are two of many podcast episodes on [BAM Radio Network](https://www.bamradionetwork.com/) that explore the topics of play and/or joy for young children. Although targeted primarily to early childhood teachers, there is much information here that's invaluable to parents – especially in the first one. Each of these episodes is only about 10 minutes long.



Have Children Lost Their Ability to Play?

Rae Pica with Nancy Carlsson-Paige

There is evidence that young children may be losing their capacity for unstructured play. Learn why this matters.

Follow on Twitter: [@bamradionetwork](https://twitter.com/bamradionetwork) [@raepica1](https://twitter.com/raepica1)

<https://www.bamradionetwork.com/track/have-children-lost-their-ability-to-play/>



Play and Learning: Still Misunderstood

Rae Pica with Kristen Kemple, Amanda Morgan

Why do we still misunderstand the connection between play and learning? How can we solve this disconnect?

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<https://www.bamradionetwork.com/track/play-and-learning-still-misunderstood/>

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“The Decline of Play” – Dr. Peter Gray

This 16-minute Tedx Talk is a must-watch!



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bg-GEzM7iTk&t=64s>

Book recommendations



Let the Children Play

HOW MORE PLAY WILL
SAVE OUR SCHOOLS AND
HELP CHILDREN THRIVE

PASI SAHLBERG & WILLIAM DOYLE
foreword by SIR KEN ROBINSON

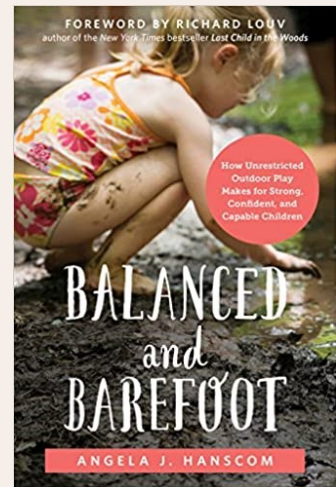
I consider this the quintessential book on why children need to play.

“Expert organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Academy of Sciences, and the Centers for Disease Control agree that play and physical activity are critical foundations of childhood, academics, and future skills--yet politicians are destroying play in childhood education and replacing it with standardization, stress, and forcible physical restraint, which are damaging to learning and corrosive to society.”

<https://amzn.to/3oBLIFS>

This book, from pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom, offers advice for offsetting the “virtual” by ensuring children are fully engaging their body, mind, and all the senses. Angela explains why unrestrained movement and outdoor play are vital for a child’s cognitive and physical development.

<https://amzn.to/3oEA3X1>

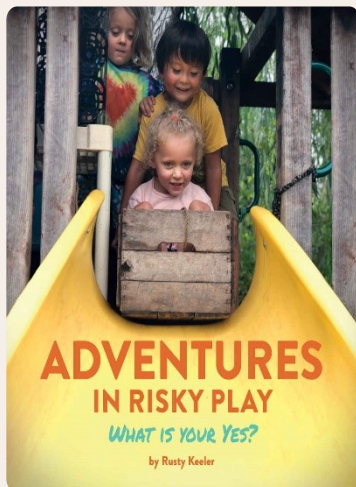


FOREWORD BY RICHARD LOUV
author of the New York Times bestseller *Last Child in the Woods*

How Unrestricted
Outdoor Play
Makes for Strong,
Confident, and
Capable Children

BALANCED and BAREFOOT

ANGELA J. HANSCOM



ADVENTURES IN RISKY PLAY

WHAT IS YOUR YES?

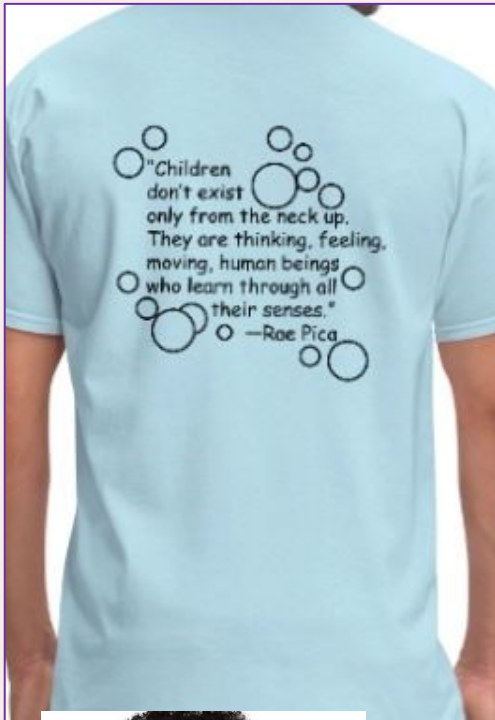
by Rusty Keeler

What you consider “risky” is what many of us experienced simply as “play” in our childhood. Expert Rusty Keeler helps put your mind at ease, as he explains why this kind of play is essential for children.

<https://amzn.to/2K85ycR>

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A PLAYFUL WAY TO EDUCATE & ADVOCATE!



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RAE PICA



Rae has been an early childhood education consultant since 1980. Dedicated to developing and educating the whole child, she is the author of 22 books, including the text *Experiences in Movement & Music* (in its 5th edition), and two of her latest, *What If We Taught the Way Children Learn?* and *Acting Out! Avoid Behavior Challenges with Active Learning Games & Activities*.

Rae is a former adjunct instructor for the University of New Hampshire and is currently a blogger, online course creator, and popular virtual presenter. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, Eric Jensen's Learning Brain Expo, state WIC organizations, education conferences, resource and referral agencies, and schools in 46 states and Canada are among those who have invited Rae to address their groups.

As a consultant, Rae has shared her expertise with such groups as

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ✓ Sesame Street Research Department | ✓ Hasbro |
| ✓ Head Start Bureau | ✓ Mattel |
| ✓ Centers for Disease Control | ✓ Nike |
| ✓ Nickelodeon's <i>Blue's Clues</i> | ✓ Bright Horizons |
| ✓ Gymboree | ✓ Canadian Broadcast Corp. |
| | ✓ Chicago Children's Museum |

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