

Learning Through Play

Did your parents ever tell you that life was more than just fun and games? Well, to a toddler, life is all about fun and games. The world is their classroom, play is their textbook, and you are their first teacher and playmate. In fact, research has shown that your child learns best when they control when, where, and what they play with, and they are having fun. Best of all, from all of this fun, they build important skills that will help them for the rest of their lives. They develop something called *executive function*, which is a big term that means they learn how to learn rather than just learning stuff. It is a handy skill that allows them to pursue goals and interests, work out problems, figure stuff out, and stay focused. It also helps them to act less impulsively and respond better to situations.^{1,2}

Why Must They Play With You?

Playing with your child is super important to them, and it allows you teach them the skills they can't learn from other kiddos. Studies show that when you play with your toddler, you teach them to work in groups, share, negotiate, problem-solve, and make decisions. It's from you they learn the rules of social interactions, the morals of fairness, sharing, and being kind and empathetic. You may notice that your toddler only plays alongside, rather than with, another toddler. You are their most favorite playmate. They feel safe with you. With your gentle guidance, they're secure enough to slog through tricky situations and big emotions. You give them skills and confidence so that when they're ready, they can play with other children, develop friendships, and keep them.²

Good Play

There are play activities that help your child to learn and grow. There are also activities that will keep your child occupied but don't really benefit them. Your child needs to be physically involved in what they're doing in order to benefit from the activity. Physical play, such as walking, running, jumping, or climbing, keeps them healthy and teaches them coordination, builds strength, and it's fun. Then there is the "not-so-beneficial" play. That would be...you probably guessed it...apps on phones and tablets, TV, and video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that a toddler's media use be VERY limited for children under the age of two and be used only when you can watch with them, talk to them, and teach them about what they're viewing. Research has shown that most apps advertised as educational really aren't as effective as you are in teaching your child.

Apps may sometimes teach:

- Memorization of the alphabet
- Numbers
- Shapes

Apps can't teach more important life skills like:

- Impulse control
- Managing emotions
- Creativity
- Social skills that prepare them for school

Your toddler needs to move, play, and interact with you and others in order to build these skills.^{2,3,4}

Busy Parents

If you're a working parent, make sure that the daycare facility or the caregiver watching your child includes lots of unstructured, active playtime for your toddler. They should be able to play with a variety of age-appropriate toys and go play outside in nice weather. When you get home with your toddler, take some time to sit and talk with them about their day or play with whatever sparks their interest. Give them books to read or a fun activity when you need to break away to make dinner. They can draw fun pictures to decorate the fridge or color in a coloring book. Try to keep the TV turned off during this time. A TV on in the background will only distract you both. If you do turn the TV on, make sure it's tuned in to children's educational programming or put an educational video on, but limit it to just one show. Your toddler doesn't need planned educational, structured games or activities. In fact, unstructured play with you is really the best kind—simple things like playing with playdough, building with blocks, reading a book together, or just acting silly together.^{4,5}

Conclusion

Having a child makes us realize how important it is to play. Sometimes we forget to act silly once in a while, and it takes our kids to remind us. Playing is rewarding, and when you play, stress falls away, and you might even find yourself giggling. When is the last time you did that?! Best of all, when you play with your toddler, you teach them important skills that will follow them into school and life. They learn to get along with others, share, problem-solve, and make decisions. They build important skills with unfettered, unabashed fun. And THAT is THE BEST way to learn!

Sources:

1. Play by Stuart Brown, MD Copyright 2009, page 5
2. Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, et al; AAP COMMITTEE ON PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF CHILD AND FAMILY HEALTH, AAP COUNCIL ON COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA. The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. *Pediatrics*. 2018
3. "Healthy Digital Media Use Habits for Babies, Toddlers & Preschoolers." [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Healthy-Digital-Media-Use-Habits-for-Babies-Toddlers-Preschoolers.aspx), American Academy of Pediatrics, [healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Healthy-Digital-Media-Use-Habits-for-Babies-Toddlers-Preschoolers.aspx](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Healthy-Digital-Media-Use-Habits-for-Babies-Toddlers-Preschoolers.aspx).
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5. Jimenez, Manuel E., et al. "Shared Reading at Age 1 Year and Later Vocabulary: A Gene–Environment Study." *The Journal of Pediatrics*, Mosby, 8 Aug. 2019, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022347619308418.