

WHY PLAY REALLY MATTERS

(FOR PARENTS WHO'D LIKE TO FEEL A BIT BETTER ABOUT ALL OF THE PILES OF RANDOM 'STUFF' IN THEIR LIVING ROOM)

THE ESSENTIALS

- Play is not a break from learning... it is the most meaningful kind of learning and bonding there is.
- Child-led play builds brain connections, boosts confidence and supports emotional wellbeing.
- Everyday items like blankets, boxes, sticks and wooden spoons are all you need to create exciting play experiences for you and your child.
- Letting children take the lead builds independence and problem-solving.
- You don't have to do anything fancy. Simple play is often the most powerful.

THE REAL POWER OF PLAY

When your child is wrapped in a curtain shouting 'I'm a flying zebra!' while balancing on a laundry basket, it might not look like high-level learning. But don't be fooled. It actually is! What you are watching is neuroscience in action.

Play isn't just something children do; it's the way they learn. When they're stacking blocks, dressing up, pretending the sofa is a spaceship or making magic potions in the sink, their brains are busy making connections, testing theories and building skills that will last them a lifetime.

Research consistently shows that open-ended, spontaneous play is crucial for early development. In fact, recent studies from University College London and University of East London demonstrate how children naturally use play to develop important learning skills. Interestingly, new Kinder-supported research from the Institute for the Science of Early Years (University of East London), also highlights how co-play with adults, especially when the child is leading, has a significant effect on language, attention span, and self-regulation (behaviour). It's not just the playing that matters, it's the shared moments and interactions that happen within it.

So, when your child is making a 'trap' for 'baddies' out of string and sticks, it's important to remember they're not wasting time. They're developing executive function. (And possibly mapping out a future career in the secret service!)

WHY CHILD-LED PLAY MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE

When children choose what to play and how to play, they're working out how the world works - emotionally, socially and physically. They're also learning key skills like how to negotiate, take turns, solve problems and regulate their emotions.

As a parent, you don't need to be in charge and lead it. Some of the most valuable play I've ever seen has involved nothing more than a cardboard box, a wooden spoon and a bit of dry pasta.

Research from Oxford's Centre for the Science of Learning shows that children are most cognitively engaged when their ideas are taken seriously and they're given uninterrupted time to explore them. And if you're joining in, not directing, it's even more effective. Children thrive when they feel seen, heard and supported in their play.

SIMPLE IDEAS THAT REALLY WORK

- Make time for play each day. Sometimes we feel like children will benefit more from scheduled 'activities', but honestly, free play is one of the most valuable things you can do.
- Offer a mix of open-ended resources and toys. Think cardboard tubes, wooden spoons, cushions, pegs, string, and duvets—simple items that invite creativity. Let children decide what these objects become. To help extend the stories they create, enrich their play with toys they already love.
- Put the children in charge of the play. As long as it's safe and makes sense to them, then that is okay. The more random the better!
- Resist the urge to tidy mid-play. (I know. It's hard.) What looks like chaos often signals deep engagement.

THE VALUE OF BONDING

Sometimes as parents, we can be worried that there is not enough 'learning' going on if our children are 'just' playing. And we may be unsure whether to "leave them to it," or to jump in and direct them. But in fact, child-led co-play is vital for healthy development and bonding. It fosters a sense of closeness and can even affect synchronisation of families' moods and stress levels. It is remarkable to realise that play can have such a positive impact on families' collective wellbeing!

So next time you step over a snake made of socks, a cardboard box house for a slug and half a slice of cold toast that can't be thrown away because it belongs to an imaginary friend... take a breath and smile. Maybe even join in. These are learning moments that bring families closer together.