



By Deanna A. Stephens

Pediatricians agree that playtime is a very important part of a child's development. But hectic family schedules and other issues are making finding time for playtime more challenging than ever.

Children's play is serious business. As parents and caregivers, we might assume that play is already a basic part of our children's lives. Most parents are used to seeing the curious hands and questioning minds of their children as they explore and learn about the world around them. It seems that children are busy all day long, whether we give them something to do or not.

It is up to adults to define what healthy play should be, and to schedule that time so that it's safe, age-appropriate, and a big part of the lives of our children. Once you decide what the limits of healthy play are for your child, you may still have questions. Should you time how long your children play by the clock? Should structured activities be part of playtime?

### Timing Playtime?

The Nemours Foundation ([www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)) suggests that toddlers should not remain idle for more than one hour at a time. The foundation's guidelines provide for 30 minutes of adult-led physical activity and 60 minutes of unstructured play each day. Other parenting sources offer similar guidelines, although most agree the time frame should vary to suit each child's interests and abilities.

"We're not giving a prescription," says Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "Each child deserves enrichment activities, time to deeply connect with family, and free, unscheduled time to master his or her environment."

Dr. Ginsburg also recommends adding independent time into children's lives to give them the opportunity to be creative, to reflect, and to relax. "When children have a downtime, they're going to fill that time with whatever fits their needs," he adds.

## Learning Through Play

Kids learn as they play. As they practice making decisions, play with imagination, and take active leadership, they also grow in confidence and resilience.

In his report to the American Academy of Pediatrics about the importance of play, Dr. Ginsburg stresses the role of play in promoting healthy child development and building strong parent-child bonds. "Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child," Dr. Ginsburg points out.

The healthy balance between reality and playtime is still more theory than reality, though medical professionals take the subject very seriously. You'll find kid zones at doctors' offices and hospitals across the nation. Some medical centers have several areas set aside for children's play.

## Playtime as Healing

At St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, playtime is considered crucial to a child's medical treatment and emotional healing. The hospital staffs certified child life specialists who give children just what the doctor ordered — and then some.

Child life specialist Amy Wortham says that play is helpful for a variety of reasons. More than anything, it's a way for youngsters to enjoy some "normal" time in a place where children are out of their comfort zone. "Playing is the way that kids learn about their world. It helps them process and experience it on their own terms," says Wortham.

Both individual and group playtimes are a daily goal at St. Jude. Playtime can include arts and crafts, playing with toys, going to parties, and just about any other way you can imagine a child having safe, healthy fun.

"It depends on how a child is feeling; there's not a structured guideline. But play and toys are often a comfort," says Amy Seitz, another child life specialist at St. Jude.

Like Dr. Ginsburg, the St. Jude staff encourages parents to make room for play and routinely reminds them that playtime is an important part of children's lives.

Sometimes parents find it hard to tame their daily stress and busy schedules so that it doesn't affect their children. But if you want to help your child build social skills, intelligence, physical coordination, and lifelong coping mechanisms, it seems the most clearly defined rule is to let them have fun. ●

# The Best Way to Play

"Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth," says Dr. Ginsburg.

Children who don't get enough time to act out or take charge of the world around them may show signs of distress. The same is true for children who are constantly pushed beyond their comfort limits. Symptoms of anxiety may include:

- **Avoiding other people**
- **Lack of appetite**
- **Nervousness**
- **Disrupted sleep**
- **Headaches**
- **Stomach aches**
- **Depression**

Even in safe, nurturing environments, playtime is threatened by a nationwide reduction in school recess

time and families' increasingly hectic lifestyles. It's true that school work and schedules teach important life skills. But most experts agree that children's health and everyday progress stand to suffer when scheduled activities leave no room for "free" playtime.

Most pediatricians also warn against entertainment that fails to stimulate interaction or thought — especially television shows and computer games. "These tools and programs are heavily marketed, and many parents have unfortunately grown to believe that they are a requirement of good parenting and a necessity for appropriate development," says Dr. Ginsburg.

Putting play back on the schedule doesn't have to be difficult, though. Old-fashioned toys like rattles for babies, blocks for toddlers, and jump ropes for school-aged children still work wonders. Even better, simply remember to carve out plenty of family time for talking, working on a hobby, playing make-believe, and reading together.