Early Childhood Development and the Importance of Play
Supported by a wealth of empirical and theoretical evidence, the understanding of play as a vital aspect of learning and healthy child development has become internationally accepted.

**What's up**

The number of research studies showing that play is an essential part of early childhood development.

"Decades of research have documented that play has a crucial role in the optimal growth, learning, and development of children from infancy through adolescence."

- American Academy of Pediatrics

**What's down**

- The average amount of time spent playing outside.
- The average duration of recess.
- Access to outdoor play spaces.

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**What’s so great about play?**

- **Constructive Play:** Manipulating objects and materials to build and create.
- **Language Play:** Engaging in the spontaneous manipulation of sounds and words.
- **Socio-Dramatic Play:** Role-playing and pretending while creating imaginary situations and worlds.
- **Exploration Play:** Engaging the five senses to better understand the world.
- **Physical Play:** Refining a range of fine and gross motor skills through whole body movements.
A natural instinct with lasting benefits

Play is essential to a child’s healthy intellectual and emotional development. Imagination, creative problem solving, identity, self-expression, and social bonding ... play enhances them all.

Benefits of Play

**Self-Regulation** Controlling actions, emotions and impulses is a challenge for the very young. Games with rules and physical play require kids to pay attention and to inhibit inappropriate responses. These skills strengthen focus and self-control, leading to social competence and enhanced learning skills.

**Social Competence** A child’s ability to exhibit socially responsible behavior, such as taking turns and following directions, requires emotional regulation and the ability to consider other points of view. Interactions among peers during open-ended play enhance cooperation and interpersonal skills. Engaging in play that strengthens social competence provides the foundation for school readiness.

**Early Learning Skills** Play that involves language and symbols helps kids develop literacy and math skills. Building with blocks enhances spatial knowledge, counting, patterning, and grouping. Studies have also shown that architectural concepts, number line estimation, and the comprehension of mathematical symbols can all be developed in young children through self-directed play.

**Physical Health** Running, jumping, and climbing all burn calories and keep young bodies physically fit. These fundamental movement skills are essential in developing body awareness and studies show that kids who are physically active are more likely to be active and participate in sports throughout their lives. Vigorous play can also help combat childhood obesity.

**Creativity** Play that is free, spontaneous, child-initiated, and unstructured engages and challenges the imagination. Early environments that encourage discovery, creative problem solving and transformational pretend play set the stage for innovative thinking and creative problem solving later in life.
Barriers to Play

No one would intentionally choose to eradicate play. But, like old growth forests and endangered species, play is often the unintended victim of well intentioned progress.

In a recent poll, 59% of parents reported having NO outdoor play space within walking distance of their home.

In POORER neighborhoods, the number jumped to 69%.

- KaBOOM! 2009.
Moving
Running, jumping, climbing, and swinging burn calories and often involve cooperative play.

Climbing
Getting off the ground stimulates kids’ senses by giving them a different point of view. Getting there challenges them to assess and take risks.

Building
Creating new worlds stimulates the imagination. Constructing small spaces for hiding and observing lets kids learn more about the world they’re in.

Multi-Sensory Stimulation
Water, plants, dirt, sand and stone stimulate the senses and allow kids to connect with the natural world.

Socializing
Building relationships with peers and adult caregivers through playful interactions is crucial for healthy development.

Concerned parents and educators should encourage town and city planners to consider children’s play needs when organizing community spaces. These environments should be free, accessible, child-friendly, and safe. They should provide opportunities for:

What you can do:
Make Outdoor Play a Priority Locally

Support the development of resiliency and self-reliance
As our society becomes more risk averse, adults tend to overstructure and overschedule the lives of children to their detriment. When engaged in play, most children can and should assess and manage their own risk.

Create and protect quality play spaces for children
Town and city planners need to consider the play lives of young children when organizing community spaces. These spaces should be free, accessible, inclusive, and child-friendly places to play.

Advocate for play time at home and school
Adults should advocate for unstructured play as an essential element of childhood and assure children have ample free time to be bored, to reflect, and to unwind.

Endorse open-ended play materials with high play value
Open-ended materials and loose parts have the highest play value due to their nonliteral nature. Use of these materials – objects and spaces open to a range of interpretations – prompts children to use their imaginations most fully.

Reconnect children with nature and outdoor play
There is a growing disconnect between children and the great outdoors. Direct contact with nature is essential for the development of emotional and physical health in childhood and should be a vital component of each child’s play life.

Seek out funding streams to support play provision and research
Play advocates should seek funding from agencies that promote improved play provision and longitudinal research efforts to examine the importance of play in the early years. It is critical to connect policy, practice, and research to meet the play needs of children, families, and communities.

Only when we acknowledge play as a basic need and human right of all children will we begin to ensure a place and time for play across all home, school, and community settings.

- Michael M. Patte, Ph.D. Professor of Education, Bloomsburg University
As play advocates, we promote excellent play through Habitat, Sustainability, and Education.

**Habitat**
Building quality spaces for quality play, with:
- Expert Design that balances confidence with challenge
- Superior Craftsmanship for outstanding safety and durability
- Accessibility for people of all abilities, and communities of all sizes

**Sustainability**
Creating lasting play environments, using:
- Premium Materials for enduring integrity
- Green Manufacturing, leading the industry in environmental sustainability
- Lifelong Play with designs for all ages (because play matters at every lifestage)

**Education**
Spreading the word about what makes great play ... and why it matters:
- Defining creative, healthy play
- Promoting awareness of the importance of play
- Promoting organizations that champion the importance of early childhood play:
  - “KaBOOM!” Kaboom.org
  - The Alliance for Childhood [www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org)
  - The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
  - The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) [www.acei.org](http://www.acei.org)
  - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
  - The International Council for Children’s Play (ICCP) [www.iccp-play.org](http://www.iccp-play.org)
  - The International Play Association (IPA) [www.ipaworld.org](http://www.ipaworld.org)
  - The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) [www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org)
  - The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)
  - The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) [www.tasplay.org](http://www.tasplay.org)
  - The U.S. Play Coalition [www.usplaycoalition.clemson.edu](http://www.usplaycoalition.clemson.edu)
Learn more - and help us save play!

This report was based on The Importance of Play in the Early Childhood Years white paper by Michael M. Patte, Ph.D. Professor of Education at Bloomsburg University.

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