

A Guide to play

FOR PARENTS AND CARERS of children and young people

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Welcome

We are all born with a need to play. Playing helps us to develop our ideas, our bodies, our thinking and our creativity. It is how we become healthy, happy adults who can interact with others and solve problems. The aim of this handbook is to provide information about play for parents and carers of children, as well as adults themselves.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is about every child's right to play. This means that the importance of children's play has been recognised worldwide as being a vital part of childhood. Every child has the right to play, no matter who or where they are, and as adults, we have an important role in making sure that this is a reality.

This handbook explains some of the normal stages of playing that most children will go through on their journey to becoming an adult. It also aims to give some ideas that you can use to play with your child. Not all children are the same, so they won't all develop in the same way. However they grow, allowing children the time and space to play freely is one of the most important things we can do.

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Play is one of the most important parts of growing up and there are lots of different theories as to why children play. We can think about it by looking at the word 'SPICE'.

Why play?

Play is of great importance to my development. Play stimulates and encourages growth in every area of my development. It enables me to gain and practice many skills, and to explore my physical and social environment.

Play is central to my development and learning. Through play I can explore, investigate, practice, take risks and interpret feelings. Play helps me to learn how to deal with people, objects and myself by 'doing'. I find play enjoyable, repetitive and non-threatening.

Play develops children

Socially

By playing with other children, making friends, learning to share, building and keeping relationships, teasing, arguing, negotiating and empathising.

Physically

Building strength and balance by running, climbing, jumping, rolling, cycling, spinning, swinging and rocking.

Intellectually

By solving problems, making their own choices, exploring how and why things happen, learning new words, building and using different materials.

Creatively

By using their imagination, expressing themselves with paint and music, making things, testing things and inventing things.

Emotionally

By using play to come to terms with experiences, practice and test situations, make themselves happy, express themselves, experience a range of emotions and relieve stress.





I'm very small and very new in the world so I'm still taking in all that's around me. I use my mouth to feel things, as it's better at doing this than my fingers are at the moment. It doesn't mean I want to eat it, I'm just exploring it!

Play from birth-6 months

In my first two years play enables me to explore and manipulate my environment. I can do this through the senses of sight, touch and movement but I am only able to do this through my 'own world'. Towards the end of my first year I am aware that objects do continue to exist when I cannot see them.

I don't know how I know how to play, I just do. Just like spiders instinctively build webs to help them survive, I play because I have to.

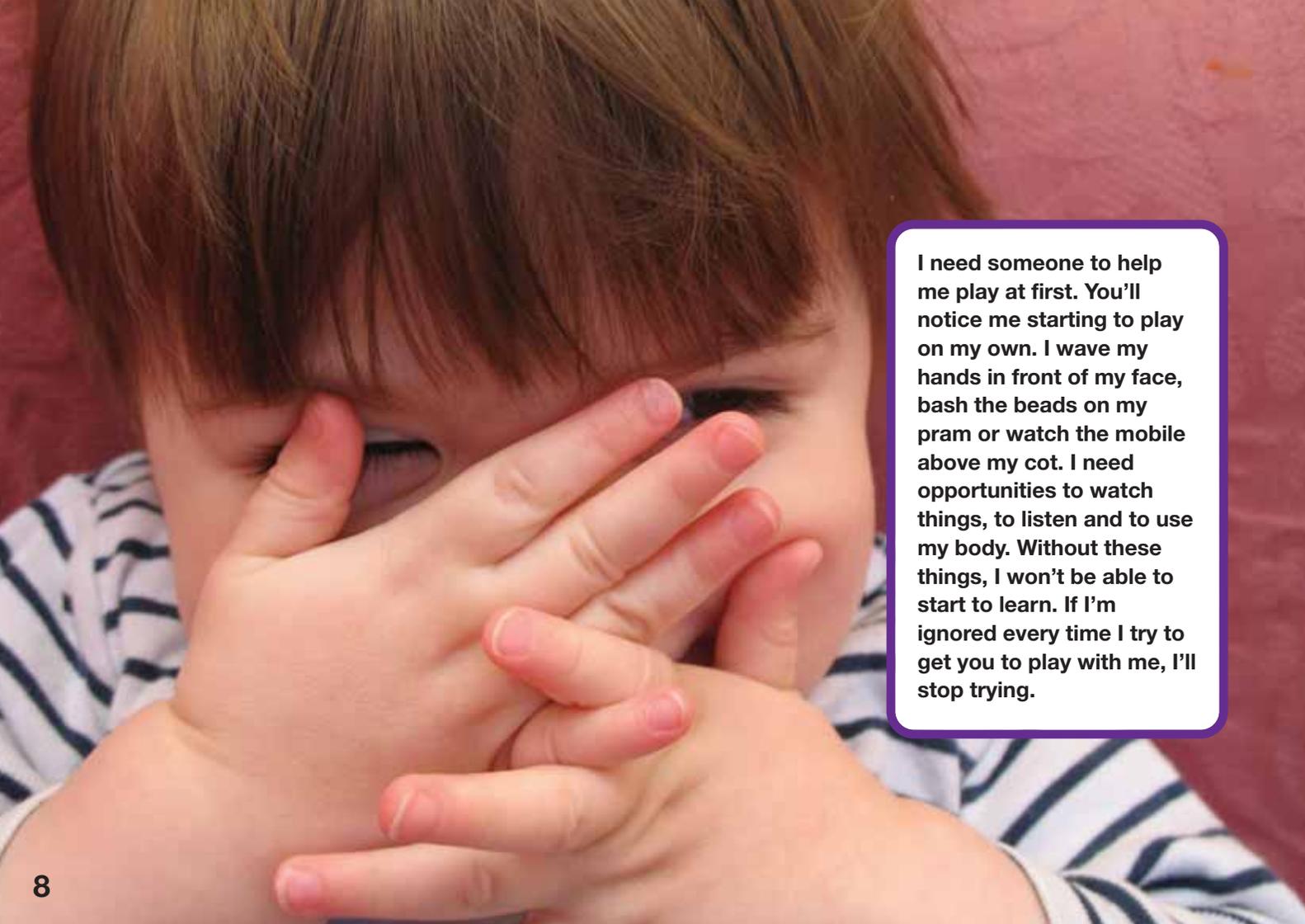
Nature is very clever, and it has made me really enjoy all of my learning, so that I keep wanting to do it. It's very important - I'm growing in size and I'm growing my mind through all the things I do.

I'm interested in everything around me but I haven't quite learned to control my body yet - like the way I can grab something but I'm not sure how to let it go! I'm learning where my body stops and where the rest of the world begins.

When I do learn to let go of the things that I grab, it opens up a whole new world for me. I can move things now

from one place to another, put things inside other things and stack things. You'll probably notice that one of my favourite games is dropping something for you to pick up. I could play this for ages!





I need someone to help me play at first. You'll notice me starting to play on my own. I wave my hands in front of my face, bash the beads on my pram or watch the mobile above my cot. I need opportunities to watch things, to listen and to use my body. Without these things, I won't be able to start to learn. If I'm ignored every time I try to get you to play with me, I'll stop trying.

Baby play 6-12 months

I am now starting to feel more confident but like to be with familiar adults, so I can get upset if you leave me with someone that is not familiar.

Sometimes I like to have a 'special' toy or blanket that I hold close to me.

I can laugh or cry with you as I like to copy you. I am starting to understand what I like and dislike and will show you if I do not like the taste, I can also let you know that I don't want to go to bed!

I am now starting to become sociable and enjoy being around other children.

Playing peek-a-boo is one of my favourite games. It's a good way of showing me how to take turns, and will help me start to understand things like how people take it in turns when they're talking.

It's really important that I use all my senses - I love to look around me, to touch things and to taste things. I'm learning about what my body can do, and how I fit into this big world. I love to move, to wave my arms, to roll

and to crawl. I need opportunities to experience the world through using all of my body.

It's never too early to start reading books either. I'll enjoy the sound of your voice, the rhythm of your words and the colourful pictures that we can see when we read together. I'll also start to understand things like how to hold a book, how pages turn, which way reading goes and what words look like.





Now that I can move about a bit more, I'm into everything that's around me! I might put all of my energy into learning to crawl or walk, a single-minded determination to get what I want. In future years, this determination becomes what makes me good at sport, or best at my job. If I don't show much interest in walking, maybe it's because I'm interested in other things first - I tend to concentrate on developing myself one bit at a time.

Toddler play 1-3 years

I'll probably start to talk around now. Learning new words comes with doing new things but it can be very hard. Let's think of a car - there's a little red one in my toy box. But not all cars are small and not all are red - they can be very big, come in lots of colours, are sometimes moving and sometimes still. I can play with my little red car, but not with the big sort. Some smell funny, some make loud noises and some whizz by me really fast and frighten me. Some I can move, and some move by themselves. Just in this one word, there's so much to learn about.

I am quick and curious but my memory is only just developing, so I forget things too. Sometimes I'm not being naughty, but I've just forgotten what you told me!

It is important for me to use natural materials, to build with them and just to play with them. I might like stones, leaves, earth, mud and water, because these make up my natural world, it's important that I experience them. Rolling on the grass, splashing water and getting my hands dirty can be great fun!

I like to play with my food. I look at the patterns I've made with my food, then I change them. It takes time to learn to eat, and I need to experience my food as well as just eat it, so playing with it is a great way of doing this. Please be patient with me as I find out about texture, colour, smell and taste!

Balance and movement are particularly good things for me to practice now, as I start to learn to control my body and co-ordinate my actions. Keep an eye on me as I try to climb onto the sofa and wriggle under the coffee table, but I'll learn quicker if you support me to try these things rather than stopping me doing them altogether.

Sometimes I like to play by copying what adults are doing. I like pretending to Hoover, to help with gardening or wash the car. This is how I learn about the things that adults do, and what I'm going to need to be able to do when I'm older.



I love to play, and I might start to move on from playing with adults to playing with other children if I attend a playgroup or nursery. Although I learn quickly by being with others, sometimes it takes me time to learn how to play with them - it's very hard and I need to learn lots of new things, like how to share, how to read facial expressions and body language. I need to learn about how to make friends, to keep them and how to play with them, and this takes practice.

Infant play 3-4 years

I enjoy being outside, and am likely to be fascinated by flowers, leaves, sticks and trees. Learning about growing is fun now, and I can help to plant and water things in the garden. It's also a good idea to let me learn about the elements - earth, air, fire and water. Playing in the rain is lots of fun, just make sure I put my coat and hat on, and dry off when I get in! What about making a kite for a windy day, making mud pies in the garden or playing with sand?

I enjoy making things, like building with blocks or drawing. It's good for me to do this, as I'm learning about shape, size and balance as well as developing my strength and co-ordination. It's also important that I am able to knock down or take apart what I've been working on. It is mine after all, and the process of making it has been much more important than the thing that I've made, so don't be upset when I 'spoil' it!

Dens are very important, and I might spend time building castles out of cardboard boxes, or make a home under a table with a blanket draped over it. If you leave these kinds of things lying around, I can use them in my play and this will help me to become creative, innovative and inventive. The more bits and pieces I can play with, the more creative I can be!

The nesting instinct is what drives me to make spaces of my own, and it's important for me to be the boss in these spaces that I've created. I'll decide who comes in and what the rules are here! It's what will help me to be independent later in life.

Toys are fun to play with, especially if they are something that I've had experience of - like if I've been to the doctors, I'll understand better how a doctors works, and you might notice me recreating the experience using a stick to give a doll an injection or something. If I'm not sure how something works, I'll make it up, using instinct and imagination to fill in the gaps.

Songs, actions and music are great fun. I will enjoy learning and singing lots of rhymes and songs, and will probably be able to remember quite a lot of them. Singing gives me a good idea of rhythm, introduces me to new words and opens up a brilliant world of song and dance!

I'm going to want to try new things, and this inevitably means I'm going to make mistakes at some point. That's how we learn, after all! Be patient with me, and let me watch what you do, and I'll figure things out.



I play much more complicated games now, as I've started to understand about rules and can follow them and make up my own. I can start games from where I left off, and the kinds of play I like are based around strong themes like good and bad, strength and weakness, right and wrong - I often do this through very noisy, physical, sometimes 'superhero' play.

Junior play 5-7 years

I might get into rough-and-tumble play too, which might look like I'm fighting. Most of the time I'm still playing when I'm tussling and it's very important for me to do this, as I learn to respond to body language and facial expression - if anything, play fighting makes me less likely to get into fights when I'm older because I understand how it works. It's part of social bonding!

I may also love to play with toy guns and weapons - this is all part of my pretend play and there's normally no need to worry about it. I don't understand as much about guns and things as grown-ups do, I just use them to help me explore things like power, and life and death. These are big things that I need time to learn about through play, and experiment with what they might mean.

Dressing-up is always fun and I'll love to try on your shirts and shoes, drape myself in blankets and use make-up to experiment with different looks! I'm developing my own identity which means that I'll want to dress up as different things - whether I'm a girl dressing up as a boy or a boy dressing up as a girl, it's okay. I need to experiment with who I'm not, so that I can better understand who I am. It's how I learn more about myself, and about others, so that I

can develop empathy, understanding and respect for those around me.

I'm capable of quite complex challenges now, and might enjoy things like treasure hunts, solving clues and doing puzzles. I might also like to create puzzles for other people to do. All of this improves my logic, problem solving and creative thinking, and is great fun!

I love to make things, and one of the best ways you can help me do this is by saving some clean junk that you might otherwise throw out with the recycling - I can use yogurt pots, cereal boxes, toilet rolls, egg boxes, pop bottles and all sorts of other bits and pieces. The more bits and pieces I have to use, the more creative I can be, whether I'm making a monster, a life-sized cow, a working rocket, a bed for a sick doll or a treasure chest!

I still love to play outdoors, and I'm starting to be able to go a little further - if you teach me how to cross the road safely, and how to weigh up strangers, I can do things like walk to school and go to the park with my friends. I need to learn how to do things for myself - it's a bit scary, but it's got to happen some time!



Now that I'm a bit older, I range further and further, and will probably like to hang out with my friends in places that are a bit further than I used to go. My friends are my social group, and when I'm with them, I can find out how social things work. I am now much more aware of others and their relationship to me, but I'm still exploring how I fit into a group. Am I a follower or a leader? Confident or shy? Am I a bully, or am I bullied?

Pre-teens 8-12 years

My creativity is in full flow, and I might enjoy making up songs and dances with my friends, or building working models of things. Playing with the elements is still very important and you could even let me have a little bit of the garden, or a special window-box that I can grow my own things in. I also still love splashing in water - watch out when I have control of the hose pipe!

It's important for me to develop my play with the elements, including playing with fire. After all, if humans had never played with fire, we wouldn't have got to where we are today! If adults can help me with fire, I'll know about how it works, and how dangerous it is, and I'm less likely to misuse it later on. Giving me a chance to toast marshmallows, have a camp fire or barbeque lets me learn about how fire starts, how it behaves, and importantly, how to put it out properly.

I need to take risks in order to test myself, and learn how to keep myself safe. You might find me playing games that you think are very dangerous, or climbing very high into trees or onto walls. Although it might look worrying, remember that I don't want to hurt myself, and I'll only go

as far as I think I'm capable of going. If I don't think I can do something, then I'm unlikely to try it. I usually know about danger, and survival instinct tells me to keep myself safe, however I also need to challenge myself and learn new things about what I can do.

These days, computers are all around me and it's very important that I learn how to use them effectively - there are very few things that happen these days without them!

Some games consoles are particularly fun, and I can spend hour upon hour trying to complete games. Although electronic play is fun, I might need reminding that this is only one type of play, and needs to be balanced with plenty of other types of play too - active play, social play, creative play and so on.





I'm growing up now, and have to deal with all those complicated things that happen as I start to become an adult. It's all a bit unnerving for me. Some days I'm not even sure who I am! There are changes happening to me, and I can't control them. I might handle this by trying to control other things instead. I might have eating fads, or become particularly difficult and temperamental.

Teenagers 13-16 years

My friends are really important to me now and there are some things I'd just rather talk to my friends about. We have stories to swap, and issues to compare. By talking to my friends about what's normal, I can assure myself that I'm normal too.

I might start to hang out with my friends in parks and things, which sometimes causes trouble because some people don't like us being there - they think it's a place for younger children. Even though I might look old, I still have the same need to play as small children do, I just play in a different way. The park has always been where I've played and I might find it hard to understand why I'm suddenly not welcome there anymore. Where should I go instead?

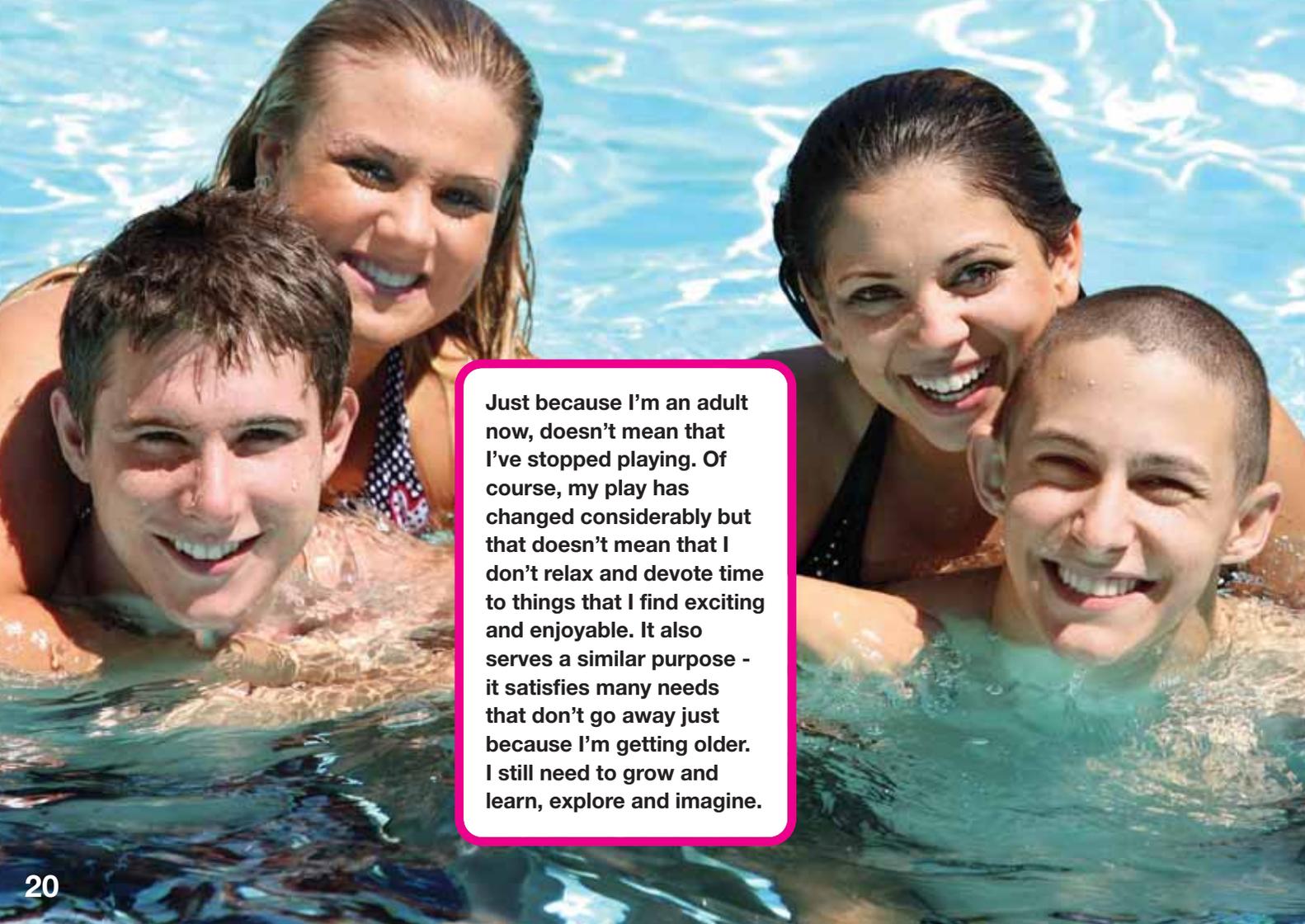
I might start to get interested in relationships around now, and it's only natural that I explore the feelings that are bubbling around inside me. I might play things like 'spin the bottle' or 'truth or dare', where I can use play to practice things that might be a bit embarrassing. This means that if I get it wrong, it's not so bad because it wasn't serious, I was just playing. This is how I sort out all those subtle things that happen between people - how do you behave

towards someone you have a crush on? These are things that need to be learned but can't really be taught.

I might enjoy organised activities now, and become a member of a club or sports team. This also gives me a sense of belonging towards a group. I enjoy having something to be part of, and the feeling that I'm making a contribution can be great. I need lots of positive feedback and encouragement as I try to establish myself as me, an independent adult in the world.

I'm still playing with my identity and will perhaps go through dress fads, hair styles or music phases that match the way I feel. I'm still trying to figure out who I am and working towards who I want to be, testing out different interests and attitudes. It's exploring the difference between who I am, and who you want me to be.

My childhood toys have been replaced by mobile phones, designer fashions and MP3 players. These are still toys though. It's a complicated time, when I still need to play, but you also need to take me seriously as an adult. Try and remember what you felt like when you were this age!



Just because I'm an adult now, doesn't mean that I've stopped playing. Of course, my play has changed considerably but that doesn't mean that I don't relax and devote time to things that I find exciting and enjoyable. It also serves a similar purpose - it satisfies many needs that don't go away just because I'm getting older. I still need to grow and learn, explore and imagine.

Adult play 16 years +

It's really important to have a playful approach to life. To take what we're given and be creative, to explore new situations and to take risks. To do something because we want to do it - just for the heck of it! As people, we have art, literature, sport, science, music and technology, all of these have come from people who have developed ideas and skills through play.

The study of the mind at play is called 'ludology', and research shows that people who have a playful approach to life are happier and healthier, are less stressed and more resilient to challenges. Humour is also very important to my playful mind and the ability to see the funny side of things, keeps me creative and insightful.

Sometimes it can be hard to stay playful, in a world where adults are expected to work hard and have lots of responsibilities. The way I choose to express my playfulness will depend on my identity and beliefs (that I developed through playing). Play is a very human thing, and something that we all have in common.

Play is still the way I make sense of the world around me and always has been, ever since I was a baby.





Recipe for good play

Ingredients

- 1 cup of time
- Splash of freedom to experiment and explore
- 2 spoons of permission to play
- Sprinkle of resources - household objects and natural materials work well
- Plenty of soap and washing up powder!

Method

- Add splash of freedom and spoons of permission to cup of time and give to children
- Ensure resources are sprinkled liberally all over house and garden
- Leave to marinade for as long as possible, then gently bring child back and wash using soap and washing powder if necessary

Results

- A healthy, happy child that will grow into a problem-solving, creative-thinking young adult
- Experimentation, exploration and spontaneous learning
- Adaptable and imaginative approaches to life





33 things to do before you're 10

How many have you done?

- Roll on your side down a grassy bank
- Make mud pies
- Make your own modelling dough
- Collect frogspawn
- Make perfume from flower petals
- Grow your own cress
- Make a papier mache mask
- Build a sandcastle
- Climb a tree
- Build a den
- Paint with your hands and feet
- Have a teddy bears picnic
- Have your face painted
- Play in the sand with a friend
- Make bread
- Make snow angels
- Make a clay sculpture
- Take part in a scavenger hunt
- Camp out in the garden
- Bake a cake
- Feed a farm animal
- Pick some strawberries
- Play pooh sticks
- Recognise 5 different birds
- Find some worms
- Ride a bike through a muddy puddle
- Make and fly a kite
- Plant a tree
- Build a nest out of grass and twigs
- Find 10 different leaves in the park
- Grow vegetables
- Make breakfast in bed for your parents
- Make a mini assault course in the garden

Thanks to www.persil.com for coming up with this wonderful list!



Take a moment and think back to a favourite play memory, from when you were a child. What were you doing? Who were you with? Where were you? How did you feel?

Outdoor play

Most adults remember fondly times when they were outside, playing with their friends, messing around in rivers, climbing trees and damming streams. Building dens in the woods, and being out all day, until the street lights came on.

Looking back on it now, it might have seemed slightly dangerous, with no adults around and being perhaps quite far from home. But it was memorable.

Now think about how children today play. There is much less opportunity for free, outdoor play, but it doesn't mean that children's need to experience it has changed.

Children need access to the outdoors just as much as before, and have the right to experience the same sorts of things.

Why play outdoors?

- Large outdoor play spaces offer children freedom. They have the space to run, climb, roll, jump and move freely in different directions.
- Games like football and tag are better suited to large open spaces, to minimise damage to property and players.

- Children can access various types of textured surfaces to physically engage in, which would be inaccessible indoors, such as sand, water, mud, pebbles, grass, concrete and bark chippings.
- Outdoor play spaces allow children exposure to the elements - raindrops, sunshine, hail and snow!
- Outdoor play spaces allow children to create noise that is often intolerable or stress provoking for parents indoors.
- The outdoors offers children much more scope for altering play space than indoor environments - for example building dens, damming streams, making mud mountains, digging and building sandcastles.





Play value is how much play you can get out of something. Children will often play with the cardboard box a toy came in rather than with the toy itself because the play value of the box is greater than the play value of the toy.

Play value

Research shows that through play children learn how to plan and solve problems. Play encourages them to develop language and communication skills and to use imagination and creativity.

To be fun they should match the child's maturity and challenge his or her skills, there should be lots of colours, textures and sounds.

For play to be of benefit, children should feel secure and comfortable in their surroundings, with supportive adults present and a wide range of toys to play with.

Through play children learn about the world around them and it is important to understand how valuable toys and play are in the development of your child.

Generally, the more ways you can play with something, the more play value it has. Simple things such as boxes, string, sticks, paper, pasta, cushions and material often make for the best play because they can become anything you want them to be and are usually things that lie about the house, or can be come by very easily.

Toys that have lots of uses - Lego, arts and crafts and stuffed teddies for example - succeed because they can be used lots of times in lots of different situations.

Cardboard boxes

Become castles, ships, dens, animals, cars, stables, garages or a toy hospital.

Tubes

Cardboard tubes like the ones from foil or wrapping paper rolls that can be used for building, swords, drumsticks, singing pipes or rungs of a ladder.

Material

Old curtains, blankets or sheets that can become shelters, beds, the sea, a wrap for a sick doll or a knight's cloak.

Other junk

Like string, tape, sand, cushions and food cartons for playing kitchens, making models, building things, making obstacle courses or playing house.



Being brave and conquering fear is important to children, and is a sign of growth.

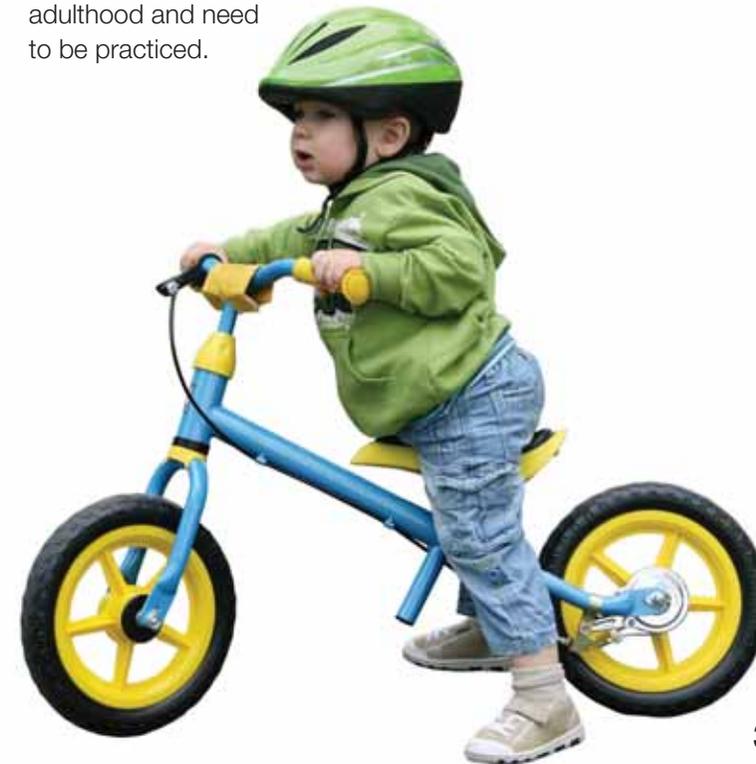
Play and risk

Children need and want to take risks when they play. These can be physical risks, such as climbing high into a tree, or emotional risks like asking someone to go out with them. What they consider risky - and what we consider risky for them - is different for each child and will change as they grow and learn. They will become stronger and more confident; they'll know their own limits and have learnt from past experiences. Without taking risks, children would never learn to walk, to climb stairs or to ride a bicycle.

As adults we need to make sure that they get a chance to play in stimulating, challenging environments so they can explore and develop their skills and abilities. This helps children to develop their independence, knowledge of themselves and social skills, to name but a few.

Accidents may happen and children may argue but, as people who care deeply about children, we need to be positive and relaxed about how they play allowing children the chance to manage themselves. We continue to encounter risk throughout our life and we need to prepare them to overcome fear, resolve arguments, deal with

situations that go wrong and make decisions with confidence. These skills are vital to a successful adulthood and need to be practiced.



Useful contacts

National contacts

Play Wales

The national organisation for children's play
Telephone: 029 2048 6050
www.playwales.org.uk

National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (Play Matters)

Support and develops toy library services in Wales
Telephone: 0207 278 9515
www.ncb.org.uk/play-matters

Playday

The annual national celebration of children's right to play
Telephone: 020 7843 6300
www.playday.org.uk

Local contacts

Play Works...!

The play development team for Neath Port Talbot
Telephone: 01639 873002
www.npt.gov.uk/play

Neath Port Talbot Toy Library

Toy loan service
Telephone: 01639 860015
www.npt.gov.uk

Play Right

Play charity and scrap store based in Swansea
Telephone: 01792 794884
www.playright.org.uk

Interplay

Provides integrated play for children with additional needs
Telephone: 01792 475938
www.interplay.org.uk

Special Needs Activity Club (SNAC)

Special needs activity centre based in Port Talbot
Telephone: 01639 899666
<http://snacwales.wordpress.com>

