

# Essential ingredients for healthy development

# Play, movement and time outside



Play is fun but it's not just for fun. Play is something we all need and is an essential part of a healthy childhood. It helps children to learn about themselves, the world and develop skills for life.

Play allows children to practice:

- » getting along with others,
- » how to sort out conflicts,
- » language skills,
- » how to move their bodies accurately and with purpose,
- » thinking skills and creativity.

Play also gives children 'down time' and can help build a positive self esteem and reduce anxiety and stress.

## What is play?

"Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do. Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do." Mark Twain

"Play is the highest form of research" Albert Einstein

"I write what amuses me. It's totally for myself" J.K. Rowling

Play can only truly be considered play if it is child-chosen and if the child considers the activity to be play. Lots of opportunities to play (alone, with friends and or family) in lots of different places is essential for healthy development.

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## Where does movement fit?

We use movement in everything we do (waving hello, looking at someone, eating, riding a bike or writing an essay). We learn how to move in steps e.g. we learn to roll before sitting and to stand before walking and to kick a ball before kicking a goal.

Movement develops:

- » our understanding of our body (through our senses),
- » muscle strength (to hold our bodies up),
- » muscle coordination (to do up buttons or ride a bike),
- » balance,
- » And allows us to engage with others and the world

Play is really motivating and encourages movement. Movement helps children to learn the skills they need to be able to do sport, school work and look after themselves.

## Play and Movement in Nature

Nature is a wonderful play environment. It is unpredictable, messy and changes with the weather. Nature provides: diversity, novelty, challenge, risk, engagement of the senses, chances for social interaction and a lot of 'toys' (sticks, holes in trees, water, rocks, sand and dirt). Research suggests that children who spend more time in natural spaces and outdoors are generally

- » more active,
- » have greater attention, motor and social skills,
- » And develop an appreciation for nature and animals (Parsons, 2011).

If children play in nature throughout their childhood, they are more likely to spend time in nature and be active throughout their lives.

## Ways to encourage your child to play in nature?

- » When playing outside, give your children time to: develop their thoughts and ideas, to finish their play, to be alone and time with friends
- » Allow children to do the same thing over and over again. This encourages deeper exploration and innovation.
- » Plan regular visits to local creeks, nature reserves, beaches. Take a book so you can be around but 'busy' to allow the children to explore.
- » Boring can be a good thing. Do not attempt to keep children busy or fill every moment of their day. Allow children the opportunity to plan, daydream, imagine and do.
- » Provide support around social interactions (eg: negotiating tools and materials) to help them make positive choices that keep them safe, keep others safe and protect the environment they are in
- » Be comfortable with the unexpected and mess. Keep a towel, spare clothes and bag for wet clothes in the car.
- » Provide non-judgmental comments about what children are doing and what they create (eg: Why did you choose those colours? Instead of "Shouldn't that be blue?"). This encourages children to have confidence in their abilities and to trust their creativity and imaginations.

## A comment about safety and risk

Yes there are hazards in nature...and that is ok! The role of the adults is to help children to identify risks and hazards around them and work out how to play safely around or with it rather than removing all risks or not allowing children outside. Healthy risk taking is an essential part of a development to learn to notice, problem solve, plan and make safe choices.

It is important to consider the following:

- » Weather - encourage children to stay hydrated, protect skin from the sun and avoid being outside in electrical storms
- » Supervise use of fire, tools, knives and water
- » Teach children to know their own limits...if you can't climb the tree by yourself you may not be big enough yet.
- » Teach children not to touch wildlife or eat wild plants without adult guidance
- » Unless it's an emergency consider asking "What is your plan?" or "Do you feel safe?" instead of saying "Stop!" "Watch out!" or "Be careful". This helps them to learn to make safe choices.