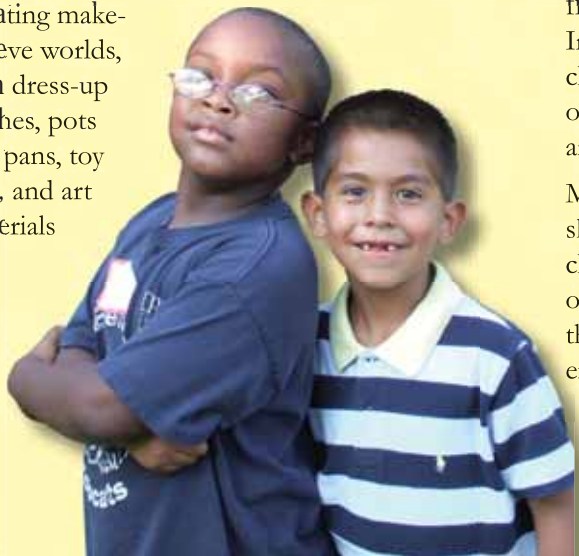


Unstructured or “free” play is necessary for young children’s growth and school success.

To grow up healthy, young children need to spend lots of time playing. The best kind of play is the kind children choose for themselves. Free play does not include watching television or playing electronic games. It also does not include organized sports and games directed by adults.

Examples of unstructured, free play include:

- Climbing, running, jumping, tumbling, and exploring, both indoors and outside
- Looking at and “reading” books, playing with puzzles, blocks and musical instruments, either alone, or with other children
- Creating make-believe worlds, with dress-up clothes, pots and pans, toy cars, and art materials



### Physical Development

When children have plenty of time for free play, they can be still, pay attention, and learn better. Learning may be easier for children who have time to run, skip, jump, and use their bodies actively. Children feel good about themselves as physical skills get better. The confidence children get from playing can help them be successful in school, social, and work life. Active play helps children have a healthy weight and make healthy lifestyle choices.

### Social and Emotional Development

Children learn important social skills when they choose what to play and who to play with. These social skills are essential to success in school, friendships, family life, and later work life. Free play is different from sports. In sports, adults make and enforce the rules for children. Through free play, children learn to make and follow rules, control themselves, and respect other’s beliefs and feelings. These are all vital skills to becoming a mature and successful adult.

Make-believe play helps young children with language, math, and friendship skills. All of these skills help children be successful in school. Young children use social play to learn how to share power, space, and ideas with others. Sometimes while playing, children feel left out or get upset when they do not get their way. Through play, children learn how to handle their emotions. Children use play as a way to work through fears and anxieties that they can not express in words.

## Cognitive Development

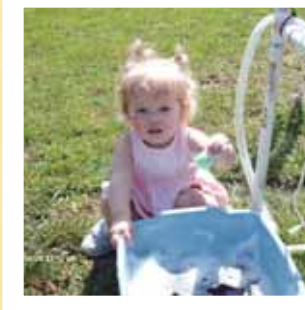
Play allows children to practice skills they will use in situations throughout life. Children develop planning skills through the process of choosing what, how, and where they will play. Things that children learn through play help them with subjects in school. Imaginative play – with toys, with other children, with parents, or even by themselves – builds children’s language and reading readiness skills. Children learn about physics when they build with blocks or slide down a slide. They learn about biology when they explore frogs, mud puddles, and feathers. Filling dump trucks with sand helps children understand math concepts. Children learn about science by watching clouds and chasing butterflies with their friends. Children are curious by nature and play is a natural teacher.

## Spiritual/Moral Development

When children choose and direct their own play, they learn about compassion and justice. Imagine that one child wants to play “house” and the other wants to play “school.” The two children will use the skills they learned through play to find a solution to the problem. As children invent games and pretend together, they learn to cooperate, take turns, and work out disagreements. Children are more likely to follow rules they make for themselves than rules made for them by adults. Children have a natural sense of fairness. They connect being fair to others as a way to increase the chances that others will treat them fairly.

## Summary

Young children need lots of opportunities for free play. When children choose what and how to play, they learn important skills and lessons that are different than those they learn in a classroom or when playing adult-directed games or activities. Families and schools can support children and their learning by providing more unstructured time for children to play.



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- Burrell Behavioral Health
- Child Care Resource & Referral
- Cox Learning Center
- Discovery Center of Springfield
- EduCARE
- Isabel's House
- Learning Connection
- Lighthouse Child & Family Development Center
- Mayor's Commission for Children
- Missouri State University
- MO-PIRC
- OACAC Head Start
- Ozarks Technical Community College
- Parents as Teachers
- Springfield-Greene County Health Department
- Springfield-Greene County Libraries
- Springfield Public Schools
- Stone Soup Ministries