**The Role of Play in Growth**

1. **Why play?**

Children play. Play is as old as childhood. Jesus once used the play of children in the marketplace as an analogy for a lesson. “We have piped unto you and you have not danced; we have mourned to you and ye have not wept.” (Luke 7:32) His quote notes two common forms of play among children. They like action: running, jumping, dancing, bouncing, and romping. They also enjoy pretend play of all sorts: playing house, farm, carpenter, school, or even funeral (hence the reference to mourning/weeping).

Play is any activity that provides its own satisfaction. Most of its pleasure comes from the activity itself rather than its results. The fun of putting a puzzle together is in putting a puzzle together. We may enjoy looking at it for a while, but we’re just as likely to take it apart and box it up.

Work, in contrast to play, is pursued to reach its end goal: cooking to make a meal, weeding to clean up the garden, splitting wood to provide fuel for the winter. Although mature adults often enjoy their work, they pursue it whether or not they enjoy it because they must work for survival.

In some ways, play can be considered work. Play is the serious *work* of childhood: it’s how they learn about their world. By interacting with their surroundings through spontaneous play, children learn how the world works, how to get along with others, and also develop many personal skills.

Babies begin by grasping things. They will grab anything within reach. When they begin crawling, their play world expands. They will push, pull, shake and move anything they have access to. Soon they begin manipulating things: turning pages of books, stacking and knocking down blocks, pushing buttons, and moving things around. Eventually they become creative: putting puzzles together, drawing, and coloring. Their play activities develop and broaden as they grow older, but the basic urge to play continues throughout childhood.

Why do children play? They play because they are children. However, from our vantage point as adults we can clearly identify and describe the role of play in growing towards maturity. We’ll begin by outlining some purposes of play. Note that children don’t plan to “accomplish some purpose” through their play. They play because it’s fun. Yet, while they pursue their God-given interests in the world around them through play, they develop in numerous ways. Play does serve important purposes.

1. Through play, children **interact with their world**. They learn how things work. Balls bounce. Dogs growl if you pull their tails; cats purr if you pet them. Echoes answer your shouts. Blocks fall over if you stack them too high. Swings go high if you pump them hard enough. Glue is sticky on your fingers. Two colors of paint mixed together change color. If you fall on the driveway and skin your knee, it hurts. Water in a mud puddle splashes if you stomp in it. You can ride really fast downhill on a bike. If you go too fast around a curve, you’ll fall over. Birds build nests in the spring. Some eat worms; others eat seeds. Other children don’t like if you take their toys or break their things. And these things continue to happen, day after day. We can count on it—that’s the way the world works.
2. Children **develop their senses** through play. They are busy with their hands: feeling, pulling, holding, squeezing, throwing, and yanking. They enjoy sounds: singing, shouting, imitating, drumming, and whistling. They enjoy noticing details, playing *I Spy*, and looking at pictures. They learn the taste, smell and feel of things.
3. Children **role-play the adult world**. They imitate adult actions, words, tasks, and occupations. They take on the role of nurse, teacher, cook, mommy, carpenter, policeman, fireman, truck driver, doctor, and farmer. Some roles require the participation of other children. Teachers need pupils; nurses need patients. Children will readily sort themselves into groups to fill the needed roles.

However, a child who is playing solo is well capable of creating imaginary playmates. The teacher may well have a whole class of imaginary students, complete with names and attendant behaviors. Wise parents will appreciate their children’s imaginative role playing behavior, even providing them a few toys or suggestions to stimulate their explorations. Imitating the adult world is an important method of growing up for children.

1. Most kinds of play provide opportunity for children to **develop skills.** Walking a balance beam, squeezing through tight spaces, and standing atop a pole develop agility and balance. Pitching, catching, bouncing and hitting balls develop hand-eye coordination and the awareness of where one’s body is in space relative to moving objects. Running games develop strength and the ability to control one’s movements quickly.

Some skills are more internal, such as daring to take risks. There’s something inherently inviting and exciting about jumping over mud puddles, climbing a tree, walking up to a strange dog, or putting your head under water.

1. Many kinds of play teach children to **interact with each other**. Young children enjoy “parallel play.” They each have their own dolls or trucks and “do their own thing,” but it’s more fun to do it in the presence of their friends. They can enjoy sharing toys and getting ideas from each other about what crops to farm or what food to bake, but they each have their own space.

As they get older, children learn to enjoy play activities that require genuine interaction. They work together to build one house, put one puzzle together, or play a board game. Or they may play house interactively after agreeing who will be parents, the maid, the children, the dog, etc.

1. **Working alongside** of an adult provides one of the richest opportunities for children to learn. The toddler can don a little apron and use a little dish towel to stand on a stool beside mommy and dry a few dishes. Little boys revel in the opportunity to don a carpenter’s belt and hammer and play with scraps of wood as Daddy works on a project in the garage. As they grow older, they become genuine helpers, even though their first efforts at helping might actually slow the progress of the adult work. The experience they gain is well worth the attention given by the adults around them.
2. **Fruitful Play**

Because play is such an important developmental activity for children, wise adults will take notice of the kinds of play the children under their supervision engage in. They will encourage their children to engage in a variety of play, to reap the benefits of each type. Although we cannot “command” children to play, we can introduce them to different types of play which they may not have discovered without our suggestions. Following are some specific examples of fruitful play:

1. **Memory games**. Most children enjoy finding pairs of identical cards of the same design. They can also remember increasingly longer lists of objects and recite them, as required in playing a game such as “I’m going on a trip, and I’m taking a duffel bag, a pair of shoes, a comb, a hat, and…” The first type of game develops their visual memory skills; the other their oral memory skills.
2. **Sorting games**. Objects can be sorted by shape, size, color, or some other quality. This develops the ability to discriminate by one specific quality and to create categories.
3. **Puzzles**. Identifying small parts of a larger picture and manipulating the pieces to fit the puzzle develops both visual and fine motor skills. Fine motor skills require the close eye hand coordination, which in turn is needed for writing with a pencil and cutting with a scissors.
4. **Building**. Stacking blocks, stick-together blocks, toy logs and other sets provide opportunity to imagine and build things.
5. **Tracing, coloring, and drawing** develop eye-hand coordination and promote creativity, on paper or sidewalk.
6. **Follow directions.** The traditional *Simon Says* game requires focused attention, following directions, and quick response.
7. **Outdoor play.** The outdoors offers children some of their richest play experiences as they notice things of nature (tree bark, bugs, bird nests), play in a sand box, play house, hunt imaginary animals, romp, run, and explore.
8. **Gross (large) muscle movement play.** Movement games require children to bounce, throw, and catch balls, jump rope, hop and skip, throw Frisbees, roll hoops or swing. All these activities are fun ways to develop spatial awareness, coordination, and strength.
9. **Fine (small) muscle movement play.** Many sitting games develop eye-hand coordination as children tie knots, string patterns of beads on a shoestring, sew scraps for the fun of it, or trace, cut, and glue shapes or pictures.
10. **Board games.** Young children enjoy simple games that involve rolling dice to move player pieces around the board. Eventually they can play old standbys such as monopoly, checkers, scrabble, and chess. Playing board games exposes children to great variety while introducing them to following rules, cooperating with others, and the reality of winning or losing.
11. **Imaginary play.** Most children spontaneously use their imagination as they play with dolls, toy trucks, farm equipment, and cookware. They name their dolls, talk to them, teach them, scold them, rock them, and put them to sleep. They cook meals, operate restaurants and stores, plant crops, fight fire, and chase wild animals. They cooperate: one becomes the “horse” as another drives him with a rope. Sometimes they carry on conversations with imaginary friends from day to day. This is a kind of play you can’t really initiate or teach. But you can encourage it by responding appropriately if they want to offer you some fresh-made pizza from their kitchen, or buy something from their store. Imagining what could be is an important skill for children to develop. Real life involves total engagement in a task (such as cooking or weeding) to eventually achieve results (a meal or a clean garden).

Many of the games listed above can be played in one or more *modes,* as listed below. Each should be encouraged for its own benefits.

**Spontaneous play** is a blessing in the lives of children. As they take the initiative to express and explore their interest in the world around them through play, their curiosity is stimulated. This in turn motivates them to pursue even more playful activities that help develop them toward maturity.

All children need time for spontaneous play. And they should be able to “go play” on their own, without needing the assistance and constant direction of adults. Spontaneous play actually originates out of the child’s own heart. It’s self-initiated.

Children who complain of being “bored” need to learn to initiate play on their own. Perhaps they would benefit from a suggestion to go play \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. But if they are never “weaned” from having an adult involved in their play, they can develop an unhealthy dependence that limits their ability to explore the world around them on their own.

**Directed play** includes an adult or older child with one or more young children. This person actually enters into the play, joining the spirit of the game while providing some direction. He helps choose the game, interprets directions, mediates in disagreements and difficulties, and models how to play well.

**Individual play** is solitary. The child builds blocks, plays with a doll, or goes hunting all by himself. This type of play serves an important purpose by focusing the child’s attention directly on the world around him without the distraction of other people.

**Group play** draws children out of themselves as they interact with others. They experience and learn things from others, through others, and with others as they explore their world together. They must learn to give and take, lead and follow, share and cooperate. This type of social interaction helps them develop in ways that solitary play does not offer.

1. **Playful Instruction**

Many of the factors that motivate play can also motivate pupils to learn in the classroom. You can take advantage of these as you introduce and teach lessons. Following is a list of some of these factors along with suggestions of how to make them part of classroom teaching.

1. **Curiosity**. What’s under this rock? How can I use a grass blade to make a loud noise? What is that bird doing with everything it takes into the birdhouse? Can I make this stone skip across the water instead of sinking? Questions like these drive children to find out things about their world.

Presenting new lessons as questions for discovery can capture pupils’ attention and motivate them to follow explanations, read lessons, carry out research, or conduct experiments to find the answers.

1. Does water expand when it freezes? If so, is the expansion strong enough to break a water-filled jar when it freezes? What about a steel water bottle? Is *any* type of closed container strong enough to withstand the pressure of freezing water from splitting it open? Or maybe the water can’t freeze if it can’t expand? Let’s find out.
2. Do all rectangular shapes with the same perimeter have the same area? If you want to fence in the largest rectangular garden you can with 100’ of fencing, what should be its length and width?
3. The –ough in *bough* and *through* do not have the same sound. What words can you think of that make other sounds with –ough?
4. If you could place the highest mountain peak in the world into the deepest ocean, would it stick out of the water?
5. **Competition.** Children enjoy friendly racing, climbing the highest, or completing the most work.

Eagerness to compete can motivate many classroom tasks. Competition can be fun and invigorating, but it can also discourage those who are slower. Slower children must have opportunities to achieve success in other ways so they do not become discouraged and give up. One variant on competition is to compete with yourself by trying to do as well or better at some task such as a math speed drill than you did the last time.

1. When given flash card drills, pupils can try to collect the most flash cards by saying the answer first. Or the first person to say the answer can stand in the front of the line.
2. The look up and find the correct word in a dictionary or a given Bible verse stands up.
3. Small groups can compete with each other. Many review activities in preparation for tests use some form of group competition.
4. **Imagination and creativity**. The kind of interest and energy that goes into playing in a sandbox or playing house can be harnessed for many types of school learning experiences.
5. Pupils can build models or replicas: an Indian village, a bamboo house, the Israelites’ tabernacle, a pyramid, or a topographical map.
6. Art classes provide many opportunities for imaginative creation: sculpting things from play dough, chalk drawing, toothpick sculpture, mixing colors, or arranging displays of things found in a scavenger hunt.
7. Children can make up new tunes, write additional verses to existing songs, or write their own songs on themes from nature, the weather, or daily activities.
8. Envision a new business you could start up by becoming an entrepreneur. What niche market can you imagine? What would you need to start it up (money, equipment, space…), how would you advertise it, and how would it work?
9. **Role play the adult world.** Much childhood play mimics adult activities: playing nurse, teacher, auctioneer, storekeeper or farmer. Questions, problems, and projects that involve real-life applications are inherently interesting to school children.
10. Choose a recipe for cookies, double all the ingredients—and make it if you can. Or make small batches of a given recipe, leaving a different ingredient out of each batch to discover how it affects the results.
11. Imagine you are a farmer. Figure the profit you could make from purchasing a dozen young piglets and fattening them for market. Determine all costs: first cost, utility costs, feed costs, veterinarian costs, overhead costs (building, equipment), labor costs, transportation costs…

Or do the same for a truck crop such as raising an acre of strawberries.