



Alberta Home Visitation
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AHVNA

9321 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5H 3T7

Phone: 780.429.4787

Fax: 780.429.4784

Email: info@ahvna.org

Website: www.ahvna.org

To Play or Not to Play

Provincial Director's Message

By Lavonne Roloff

Since the industrial revolution, the study of children and child development has evolved as children gradually left the work force and parents were encouraged to send their children to school to learn. As time has gone on, more research has been done in the area of early childhood and the benefits of play in a child's learning have been explored. This issue of Connections discusses the importance of play in our children's lives from birth and beyond. There are also practical suggestions for practitioners and resource/links that will be beneficial for parents.

It is also important that play be a part of our adult lives. The benefits of engaging in play activities include developing imagination and creativity, problem solving, relaxation and stress reduction. Indeed these are the same benefits for children. As adults, how do we ensure that play is a part of our daily lives? How do we create the balance between work and play? It may be worthwhile to take a look to see if your work-life balance includes time for fun, humour and play.

When we have a good balance of work and play, we can improve our relationships at home and at work. We are able to improve our communication with others when we include laughter, lighten the situation or avoid conflict with appropriate humour, and be more spontaneous. At home, do we lighten up by dancing in the kitchen, going down the slide with our children, wading through the pool or sharing a funny

story? By connecting with others in a playful way, we can put things in perspective and laugh, thereby releasing endorphins. Ultimately, there can be a shift, and we feel relaxed as well as energized.

Consider this quote by George Bernard Shaw: "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

Have some fun this fall

whatever that may consist of—dancing, taking an art class, or going for lunch with a friend. ■



Lavonne Roloff is the Provincial Director of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

Let's Get Serious About Children's Play

By Christina M. Rinaldi



Play is essential

Can you imagine a world without play? Many of us can't, and with good reason. Play is essential for human development and learning, and contributes to the growth of infants and children in the early years (0-5) and beyond, in the following areas:

- cognitive (curiosity, creativity, problem solving)
- physical (motor skills and coordination)
- social and emotional (taking turns, sharing, cooperation, role playing, self-regulation)

Types of play

However, play may also be thought of as its very own developmental domain.¹ During the early years, there is considerable change in the type and amount of play in which children engage. The sort of play most of us are familiar with in the early years is cognitive play, categorized progressively into

- functional play (simple and repetitive motor movements with or without objects)
- constructive play (creating or building something)
- dramatic play (acting out roles—real or imaginary)
- games with rules (understanding and following rules in games and activities which may take the form of physical or motor activity)²

These different forms of play can be experienced in solitary, parallel or group play.

Development through free play

There are great benefits of play. However, the type of play most salient to early childhood is free play—play that is child-directed, voluntary, internally motivated and enjoyable, and which has no externally imposed adult objectives or adult-focused curriculum.^{3,4} Why is it then that certain forms of early childhood play may be on the decline? In particular, the free exploratory non-adult-directed play that children need

for optimal development is observed less often in today's fast-paced world.

Play has often been argued to be a fundamental right of all children.⁵ By scheduling, structuring, controlling and being over involved in all aspects of playful experiences, adults may be robbing young children of some crucial foundational experiences. Perhaps there is a mismatch between research that associates breadth of play experienced during the early years with success later on (school readiness, literacy skills and social-emotional abilities)^{6,7} and the practical interpretation of structuring children's free time to ensure future success. The opposite extreme is also problematic—by not being present, responsive and supportive, adult caregivers miss important opportunities to help facilitate and promote optimal development through play.

So, what can adults do?

We can evaluate how we are spending time with our children, as well as critically assess the quality of experiences to which children have access. Elkind⁸ argues that since the nineties, children have lost an average of 12 hours of free time, eight of which were in the form of unstructured play (indoor and outdoor combined). Where have these 12 hours gone? One possible explanation may be that children (even young ones) are enrolled in more organized activities, and furthermore, are involved in passive activities such as viewing television or multimedia.^{9,10,11}

It is recommended that parents and caregivers protect children's precious unstructured playtime by taking advantage of spontaneous opportunities in the day-to-day moments, recognizing child-centred or child-driven play, and responding in a warm and engaging manner.^{8,12}

Of course, there also is a place for other types of activities (parent and tot swim programs, reading groups, structured play groups). However, these events should not come at the direct expense of free child-initiated play. Parents should be encouraged to play with their children and supported to find ways to become comfortable with child-directed play in the early years, as this will be one of the best investments they will make in their child's development. ■

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Christina M. Rinaldi, PhD, RPsych, is a developmental psychologist and professor of educational psychology at the University of Alberta.

Importance of



By Laura Cunningham-Shpeley and Alison Amero

When we think of “play,” we often think of children in the outdoors, enjoying themselves in spaces that are safe from harm, playing with friends, using their imagination and getting wonderfully muddy!

Unfortunately, this is far from the reality of the way many kids play today. Our lives have become more sedentary, enclosed and plugged in. As parents, we are occupied with chores in the house, our favourite TV show or a friend’s travel blog. We keep our kids close to us because the world is full of “danger” and “bad people.” So, we have bought the latest video console because that allows our kids to “play” in a safe environment and us to get our work done. Win-win right? Wrong!

Research comes out every day telling us how good exercise is for our physical and mental health.

Dr. Grant Schofield¹ states that it will also make us smarter. He states that unstructured play is emerging as a critical determinant of brain health in children. Movement is thinking; the more you move, the more your brain is working and engaged.

Kids and adults must move

Home visitors engage with families often on a weekly basis. Many have learned that their best conversations happen with parents when they don’t need to make eye contact, for example, when driving or walking. So why not grab the kids and walk to the nearest field or park? This models to the parents how easy and important it is to get the kids outside and offers a template for healthy behaviour and routines for the whole family.

Toolkit for play

Alison Amero is a physical activity coordinator for First Nations and Inuit Health. Her role is to help First Nation communities get more active—and she is passionate about her work. Here’s her toolkit that family visitors can use to play with parents and kids:

- soft or rubber balls (different sizes)
- skipping ropes
- plastic water bottles full of rice or beans (great markers for games)
- puck paints and paint brushes (pick up at the dollar store)
- cardboard boxes (any size)

Let the kids get their hands on this kit and take a step back. Don’t work too hard to organize them—kids are naturally curious,

and this is their chance to shine. Follow their lead and listen to their instructions. They want to play with you, but not play by your rules!

So, take the time to integrate play into your practice, a low-cost way for everyone to feel better physically and mentally! ■

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RESOURCES

Best Start – Great activity posters to order for your office or health centre – French, English and culturally- adapted aboriginal versions available at <http://tinyurl.com/6u27taa>.

Healthy U! – The provincial government’s website for all things healthy at www.healthyalberta.com/155.htm.

Move and Play Cards: Be Fit for Life – Great game ideas on each card that need very few supplies and provide lots of fun! \$40 per set at <http://tinyurl.com/6pfzubl>.

Right to Play – Their vision is “To create a healthier and safer world through the power of sport and play” at <http://righttoplay.com/Canada/Pages/landing.aspx>.

Alison Amero
Regional Physical Activity Coordinator
First Nations and Inuit Health, Health Canada
Phone: (780) 495-4114
Email: alison.amero@hc-sc.gc.ca

Laura Cunningham-Shpeley
Program Manager, Maternal Child Health Home Visitation
First Nations and Inuit Health, Health Canada
Phone: (780) 495-2177
Email: laura.cunninghamshpeley@hc-sc.gc.ca

Play—More Than Just Fun

By Wendy Peverett

“Children don’t play in order to learn, although they are learning while they are playing.” (Kallilia, M., 2006, p.20)

The concept of play is not new. Since the beginning of time, children have engaged in play in a variety of ways and for varied purposes. Throughout history, the value placed on play has shifted and changed. In *The Republic*, Plato wrote, “Enforced learning will not stay in the mind...let your children’s lessons take the form of play.” During Puritan times, play was an enemy to be guarded against so that children could focus on family responsibilities, chores, work and their schooling.

At the United Nations Conference in 1990, play was acknowledged as a fundamental right of all children. Today the role of play is again being questioned with increased pressure on parents, children and those offering early childhood programs to focus on school readiness (a pre-determined set of academic skills). Is there time for play when there is an ever-increasing demand for academic instruction?

Defining play

Defining play is difficult. There are over 100 definitions in the Oxford dictionary alone. It is often more easily recognized than defined. Attitudes and understanding of play are often based on personal beliefs, experiences and values. What do you remember about how you played as a child? Is it different from how children play today? Was play valued, or was it something you did “after” your work/school/chores were completed?

Developing through free play

There is growing recognition of the importance of play on a child’s overall development. A number of studies show a direct link between play and the varied dimensions of child development. For example, through unstructured free play, children explore their world, develop their imaginations, try new skills, attempt to solve problems, work on social skills, increase their language skills and take risks that they might not otherwise take.

There is a great deal of incidental learning that happens during play. However, if you ask children about what they are learning, they don’t know or particularly care—they are focused on having fun! And sometimes, you can turn the most mundane chore into an impromptu game: sock basketball or the sudsy adventures of the dish and the spoon!

Encouraging play

So, as a society, what can we do to encourage play? Be playful ourselves! Take a moment to

- build castles out of sand
- colour a cat purple
- share a story that comes not from a book, but from your imagination
- make all the animal sounds while singing Old MacDonald had a Farm (don’t forget to include some animals you might not find on the farm)
- play a game
- run from a band of marauding pirates
- do something silly without fear of being labeled “childish.”

Remember that children learn what they live and live what they learn. ■



Some benefits of play

- Sparks creativity
- Develops language skills, the foundation for reading and writing and key to future learning
- Expands the mind
- Grows the child physically, intellectually and emotionally
- Increases attention span
- Helps forge friendships and build caring relationships
- Allows children to become masters of their own destiny and directors of their own experience

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Wendy Peverett is the literacy links coordinator with the Centre for Family Literacy.

What's Play Got to do With It?

By Kathy Lynn

There are blocks of various shapes and sizes spread all over the living room floor. In the midst of this confusion sits 18-month-old Joey. He surveys his riches. It appears that the wealth of all these blocks is all he could want out of life. He takes one at random and places it on the floor, then another and puts it on top. With glee he sweeps his hand across the stack and sends the two blocks flying. Then he picks them up and starts all over, only this time he uses four blocks. He continues this game, each time concentrating on building higher stacks, then changing his demeanour as he joyfully reduces his stacks to rubble.

Eighteen-month-old Kendra is clapping her hands to the music. She is sitting on her mom's lap in a circle with six other toddlers and their parents at a play workshop at the local community centre. She leans against her mother's chest watching the other toddlers and imitating their behaviour. An upbeat leader directs the activity. During the songs, Kendra and her mom join the leader in singing. When the music stops, they look to her for direction. Are Joey and Kendra both playing?

Although the definitions of play vary slightly, experts would say that Joey is playing and Kendra is involved in a structured activity. It may be fun, but it's not play. This is not to say that what Kendra and her mom are doing is a waste of time, but in order to look at play and its role in the development of independent and self-sufficient young adults, we need to first determine what constitutes play.

The Early Childhood Education program at Lethbridge Community College in Alberta teaches that the actual definition of play is not as important as the presence of certain qualities that characterize it.



Elements of play

- Play is voluntary and intrinsically motivated.
- It is chosen freely.
- The child controls the activities.
- It is pleasurable, spontaneous and enjoyable.
- There is activity.
- There is a symbolic and meaningful component to the activity.

Joey is playing. He has decided on his own to stack the blocks and knock them down. It is not a game he was directed to play. He is in control of the play and has given some meaning to the building and destruction process. And in stacking, crashing, collecting and restacking the blocks, he is actively engaged in the play. Kendra is not playing. Her mother, the group leader and the other children are directing her in the activity.

You can look at play as a continuum from total play to no play depending on the number of characteristics of a given activity. Joey is at the play end and Kendra is at, or very close to, the “non-play” end of the spectrum.

Why does it matter? And what does it have to do with raising children to be independent and self-sufficient? And what messages do we need to give to the parents in our program?

While we can develop skills from structured learning activities and events, our learning is less internalized. When I read about a new activity, I may be able to imagine it, but until I actually try it, it's just not going to be part of me. Even if I do understand, I need to draw on the experiences I have gleaned throughout my life to read the instructions and imagine what they mean. Children don't have these experiences, so they need to develop their own. And play is the most effective way for them to learn. Children raised with a good balance of structured activity and free play have a real advantage.

This article is an excerpt from *But Nobody Told Me I'd ever Have to Leave Home* by Kathy Lynn, a parenting speaker, author and columnist. For information, or to hire her as a speaker, visit her website at www.ParentingToday.ca.



Promoting Play for Parents

Compiled by Lavonne Roloff

Home visitors can support parents in encouraging their children to play. While this may seem simple, parents sometimes need suggestions and ideas on how to provide play opportunities. Some parents may need to be taught how to play with their child. They may feel that playing is indulgent or a waste of time. You can help them understand that play is a key learning tool for children.

As a home visitor, you can provide

- information on the importance of play, reading and listening to children
- learning materials
- your knowledge about child development principles and appropriate practices
- ways to take advantage of everyday situations such as bath time, making meals, etc.

Home visitors can

- discuss key concepts related to play and a child's learning
- demonstrate various skills and appropriate play for the child's development
- support parents as they interact with their child and choose appropriate toys and activities
- make it clear to parents that when they are having a play session, it is necessary to give their full attention to the child
- reassure parents when they are playing with their child
- discuss a variety of ways to play with a child
- emphasize the importance of the child-initiating activities
- discuss themes parents notice in their child's play (moving vehicles, being more physical, etc.)
- ask parents about their own play experiences
- encourage parents to use their own imagination

Learning materials for play

Play does not have to involve expensive toys. There are many materials in the home that will aid in learning and play.

Homemade learning materials include the following:

- clear plastic jars with lids and pompoms inside
- clear plastic bottle filled with rice and small toys, bottle taped shut
- paper towel tube with hot wheels cars
- empty facial tissue box to put items such as toys in and out
- empty cereal box to put family pictures on (pictures can be rotated)
- coffee can with lid, and lid cut to put things in
- kitchen box (tin pie plates, plastic cups, discarded pots and pans, wooden spoons)
- tactile box (ball, truck, blocks); encourage toddler to name the objects

Albert Einstein said, "Play is the highest form of research," and "imagination is greater than knowledge." Here are some ways for parents to assist their children.

Principles for parents¹

- Spend time observing your baby or child and learning about their style of play, how your child interacts, what your child enjoys doing and understanding his or her inner world and feelings.
- Provide a special place or places where your child is free to play with objects, toys and props that can encourage play and imagination.
- Regularly join your child in play by giving the activity or game your undivided attention.
- In pretend play, accept your child's feelings and join in

the play.

- Encourage playfulness and joyous exchanges and experiences.
- Provide your child with the opportunity for a variety of different play experiences to encourage his or her imagination.

Ways for parents to encourage play²

- Let play be directed by your child.
- Let play be unstructured.
- Provide a variety of toys and playthings appropriate for your child's age.
- Rotate toys.
- Play with your child.
- Be ready to stop playing or to put away some toys if your child shows disinterest or cries.
- Take your child outside to explore.
- Allow your child to help with housekeeping tasks (washing dishes, sweeping the floor, etc.)
- Encourage your children to do artwork using their own ideas.
- Show your children that you value their play by giving them lots of praise and encouragement.
- Be playful yourself. ■

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Lavonne Roloff is the provincial director of the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association.

Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on **Aboriginal Children and Families**. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by October 15, 2012.

Hearing from you

Connections is published three times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any comments to Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA Provincial Director, by phone at 780.429.4787 or by email to info@ahvna.org.

Editor: Carolyn (Carri) Hall, MA

Contributors: Lavonne Roloff, Christina M. Rinaldi, Laura Cunningham-Shpeley, Alison Amero, Wendy Peverett and Kathy Lynn

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AHVNA
9321 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5H 3T7

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Fax: 780.429.4784
Email: info@ahvna.org
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UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states

1. Parties will recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

In 2010, there were eight consultations on Children's Right to Play that were held in Johannesburg, Nairobi, Beirut, Mumbai, Bangkok, Tokyo, Mexico City and Sofia. The purpose of the consultations were to

- mobilize a worldwide network of Article 31 advocates
- to harness expertise in raising awareness of the importance of play in the lives of children
- to gather specific information demonstrating the infringement of the child's right to play
- to formulate practical recommendations for governments with regard to compliance

The International Play Association (IPA) is an international non-governmental organization that provides a forum for exchange and action across disciplines and sectors. Its purpose is "to protect, preserve and promote the child's right to play as a fundamental human right." (Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

In 2008, the IPA requested the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to develop Article 31 of the UN Convention to include clarification about play and to ensure that there is a full range of benefits of play for all children worldwide.

The following organizations also offered support:

- International Pediatrics Association
- World Organization of Early Childhood Education
- World Leisure Association
- International Toy Library Association
- Right to Play International
- European Child Friendly Cities Network
- International Council on Children's Play

In North America, most children have the right to play; however, that is not necessarily the case for children in other parts of the world. There are many different meanings and interpretations of what Article 31 means; there is general agreement that children should not be working. However, there are still discussions about what play is, especially unstructured or free play, and the opportunity for children to participate in activities that are not led by adults. ■

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