



Play to Learn

For children, free play—in the physical world, without screens—is not merely a break from learning, but rather an integral part of learning. Too often, play in childhood today is described as screen-based (J. Haidt). True play-based education is critical for the development of the whole child. Plus, learning through play is fun because it's how kids' brains are wired!



Play Encourages Cognitive Development

- Free play [helps develop](#) executive functioning skills, vocabulary, content knowledge and creative thinking skills.
- Play stimulates neurological growth.
- Play helps a child develop problem-solving skills as children learn to work through challenges and find solutions.
- Playful activities encourage creativity and imagination: children learn to use inventive thinking and adaptability.



Play Encourages Social and Emotional Development

- Free play helps develop skills such as self awareness, social-self regulation, and decision making. These foundational skills also support academic learning and success later in life.
- Through play, children learn to observe social cues, listen to others' ideas, and develop skills critical for empathy. Social play also helps children develop a shared imagination.
- Play encourages teamwork and collaboration. Group play teaches children to cooperate with others, follow a group plan and rules, and develop empathy.



Play Encourages Physical Development and Fine Motor Skills

- During play, children develop strength, muscle control, reflexes, coordination, fine motor skills, and how to take healthy risks.
- Play positively contributes to a child's health and physical development.
- Regular physical play promotes a healthy lifestyle.



Resources

- [Embracing Learning Through Play](#) (Harvard Graduate School of Education)
- [The Power of Playful Learning](#) (NAEYC)
- [Learning Through Play: Benefits, Ideas, and Tips](#) (Begin Learning)
- [How Fun and Games Help Children Thrive](#) (Healthy Children)
- [The Four Letter Word Every Parent Should Know](#) (Living Skills in the Schools)
- [Jonathan Haidt on the Mental-Health Crisis and Smartphones](#) | WSJ News



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What Can We Do to Encourage Free Play in Schools?

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” —Fred Rogers



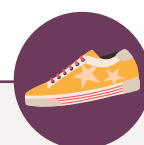
EMPOWER CHILDREN TO LEAD

- Create free-play areas that allow young children the opportunity to choose their activities. At home or at school, set up various stations such as building blocks, drawing/coloring, sand box, and math manipulatives that allow a child to choose their play/learning experience.
- Provide opportunities for children to interact, explore, and play without guidance from adults. Adults are nearby only to ensure safety.
- Allow students free time to engage in playful activities that explore their interests at their own pace. Encourage more recess time with fewer restrictions and rules.
- When conflicts arise, give children a chance to work out a resolution on their own before stepping in.



PROVIDE THOUGHTFUL EXPERIENCES

- Provide experiences that encourage imagination and creativity.
- Weave academic activities with play.
- Through playful games and interactions, children can learn academic skills with fewer of the pressures of formal instruction.



PRIORITIZE PHYSICAL MOVEMENT, ESPECIALLY OUTDOORS

- Set up breaks in learning, providing activities that involve physical movement.
- Allow time for outdoor play to increase fine and gross motor skills.
- Encourage safe outdoor exploration with time for stopping to make observations.