

It's Time to Play

Students have spent the last nine months in a classroom with their days structured and scheduled for them, and as the final few days wind down they have one thing on their mind.... Playtime! They aren't wrong. Many researchers have found there are countless benefits to children playing. Helen Dodd, professor of Child Psychology at the University of Reading said, "Children need time to reconnect and play with their friends & family, they need to be reminded how good it feels to be outdoors after so long inside, and they need to get physically active again."

As we think back on our own childhood, there are countless memories of summer playtime, adventures, discovering new hobbies, and spending time with friends and family. Not only are these core memories, but these times we spent playing during the summer were actually fundamental to every aspect of developing into who we are today. Child development happens in moments of freedom. Children learn by doing. Play is how they explore the world, learn to assess risk, try things out, and get to know and gain confidence in themselves. Free play affects the developing neurons of the prefrontal cortex during childhood, preparing the brain for emotional regulation, planning, and problem solving. These are all important skills to have as a successful adult, so we want to encourage our children to start developing them now.

Over the past few years, Vitamin D deficiency in children has increased tremendously. This key nutrient boosts immunity, prevents some autoimmune diseases, and builds strong bones and teeth. Less and less kids are going outside to play, which results in less Vitamin D. Playing outside has many benefits for our physical and mental health. Being outside stimulates all five senses in a child. It allows them to be free and soak in all nature has to offer. Children who play outdoors develop more solid attention spans, stronger self-direction, and a more vibrant sense of curiosity. Mr. Rogers says it best. "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."

Nowadays most of our children live in an overscheduled world. As parents it is important to provide opportunities and encourage free play. Some ways we can do this are by modeling play. You are never too old to play. On a nice summer night instead of staying in to watch your favorite show, get outside and play. When our kids see us play, it gives them the desire to do the same. Some other ways we can foster a playful house are planning for play in the day, being open to risk, finding fun in the everyday items you already have, and waiting out the cries of the famous line "I'm bored". Lastly, the most important way is to play together. A child wants nothing more than to spend time with their parents. Even though they may often say otherwise or appear "too cool" your kids really do want to play with you. Play a game of catch, build a sandcastle, take a bike ride, draw with sidewalk chalk, or just sit outside and talk. The options are endless, but what matters most is getting into the spirit of doing it and doing it together. Time flies and our kids will be grown before we know it. We will never regret spending too much time with them. Embrace summer break and embrace the power of play!