**C’mon Let’s Play!**

All the benefits of play cannot be captured in a single article therefore, I won’t attempt to cover it all in this publication. Working as a pediatric occupational therapist for over twenty-five years I have learned from my clients “If it ain’t fun, I ain’t doing it!” I realized that I feel the same way about most of my day to day leisure activities. I can so well relate to my clients because there is still a little girl in this gray- haired therapist. Needless to say, Play has been the driving force behind my treatment sessions when attempting to facilitate growth and development in the clients I treat. Why have I chosen play versus an authoritarian, pre-scripted type of session? As Hirsch-Pasek stated, *‘play is a natural state of childhood.’*

Let’s first address what play looks like. Oftentimes when working with children I hear, *“I was just playing”* (we’ll call this person Mac) when one of their peers become upset (we’ll call this person Todd). Please don’t be offended due to my desire to take us back a few years. I ask the child several questions to help them determine if what they are doing is playing or something else: Mac is Todd laughing? Mac did Todd get a chance to choose a game? Mac how would you feel if Todd played that game with you? It is so important during play that everyone has an opportunity to feel important enough to be the leader and or heard. I have a friend whose son was not at all interested in “playing” football and she was adamant that he play because he looked as if he would be good at it. After many episodes of phantom pains and woes when it came time to go to football she finally gave up. Really, she was only trying to get him involved in what she thought would be fun and exciting for him. What she thought was “play” was not play for him.

Play takes on a different look and form as we develop and age. This is partly due to our developmental stages in life, abilities, and disabilities. No matter what stage you are in, play has been found to stimulate healthier brain and overall development. Executive function (being able to think, plan and execute an activity) is a cognitive development that is refined during play. Coordination and integration of both large and small muscles take place during structured and unstructured activities. Attention to task is required for turn taking, following directives and completing the individual or group task. The co-partner to play is laughter. Laughter is also therapeutic in many ways including the release of hormones that make us feel good. Repetition is the key to the refinement of novel and more familiar skills. The likelihood of your child acquiring a sought after skill is greater if the facilitator uses a means that is enjoyable and full of laughter.

So many fine and gross motor skills are acquired during the day-to day-exploration of our environment. Knowing what makes your child happy, laugh and engaging is important when trying to teach skills such as attending, holding a spoon, walking, kicking a ball, tying his/her shoes, etc. These skills are sharpened during play activities that may seem unrelated to the task at hand. Such activities ignite splinter skills that lay the foundation for the acquisition of higher level skills. Tummy time is so important because it places the child in a position to use larger muscles in preparation for crawling. Maintaining your child in this position for a significant amount of time is drastically increased while engaged in a playful activity that makes this time more enjoyable.

Hopscotch, let’s take a look at this game; one I often played as a child. The game requires quite a few skills; waiting your turn (self-regulation), throwing a stone in the correct block (eye-hand coordination), hopping on one leg, then two, then one, then two (sequencing, bilateral coordination, motor planning and control) and engaging with a peer (socialization). Family bonding is wonderfully done through play. This is an opportunity to learn about each other’s likes, dislikes, needs, desires as well as provide the necessary discussions, encouragement and feedback to help in the overall development of the family.

The quality of skills acquired during play is immeasurable partially due to the child’s desire to repeatedly engage. As I previously stated, the benefits of play cannot be captured in a single article however, hopefully this article will wet your whistle to explore how play can improve your child’s overall development and the family dynamics.

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