

It's Okay to Just Stay Home and Play

By Jane M. Jacobs, MA

Remember the carefree days of childhood when you could just play until it was time for dinner? Many of us have fond memories of exploring the neighborhood with our friends or playing at home with siblings. In this era of goal-oriented and scheduled activities, we sometimes forget the value of allowing time for simple, non-parent-directed play.

Parents Aren't Needed All the Time

Creating times and places for your children to be independent from you will help you relax while they play. Just as Montessori teachers carefully prepare the classroom, as parents, you can provide a safe home environment, inside and outside, so that your child can explore and play for periods of time on his own, without your help or direction.

Keep in mind your child's age and abilities as you create these spaces. You may:

- Provide items to encourage movement as well as imagination: push toys, blocks, a dollhouse, toy vehicles, puzzles, boxes of many sizes, scarves and hats, child-safe kitchen and work tools, garden tools, and a variety of art supplies.
- Display the items in an organized and attractive way within easy reach. A jumble of toys in a toy box can be frustrating. Alternate toys from time to time rather than having everything out at once. For the young child, arrange a few toys on a low shelf for easy access and return. "A place for everything" helps children learn to keep things tidy.
- Show your children how to use new toys and tools without using wordy instructions. (Older children may need even fewer directions.) Then leave them free to make original discoveries and creations.

Programmed to Learn

Unstructured play is a time of discovery without self-consciousness. While playing and exploring, your child is learning so much without being directly taught. Understanding how children naturally absorb knowledge, Maria Montessori respected children's need to investigate and study without adult interruption.

Intelligence and creativity develop as children explore the world, figuring out on their own how things work. Older children will be more social than younger ones, sometimes seeking playmates for a game or project. This type of play allows children to learn self-regulation. Listen for the "rules" they create during their play—they are often similar to the ideas they have internalized from adults at home or school.

Your child will flourish when there is time and space to follow an impulse and create something unique. Don't interrupt or try to improve the project. A child will unconsciously feel judged and

may stop trying for fear of doing it wrong. A young child's castle built of blocks will never be as elaborate or realistic as yours. An older child's fort may have a precarious foundation with less-than-square corners.

Different Play at Different Stages

The young toddler may be feeding his doll or loading blocks on the dump truck. A 3-year-old may play alongside a friend, happy with the company but not interacting a lot. And, as described earlier, older children will seek out playmates. Cooperative play will happen spontaneously as children mature, so there is no need to force it. Let your child take the lead.

When you do play with your children, make it fun! Sometimes conscientious parents believe that they must provide learning opportunities no matter the situation, forgetting that intelligence can develop without adult input. Let your child choose the activity and invent the parameters. Games that require following the rules are appropriate for children over the age of 4 or 5. Play in a non-competitive way where everyone feels like a winner.

Relax and Keep Playing

Free time gives everyone time to refuel, think, and figure things out. The truth is that your child will grow, learn, and thrive without the constant organized frenzy of always being on the go. Set aside at least one or two days a week for free time; this may mean you have to eliminate one or two scheduled lessons or practices. But think about this: If you don't have to spend every day chauffeuring or cheering for your children at the latest event or game, there might be less stress for your whole family—and you'll find yourself with more time to relax and play.

You need not write the script for your children's lives. They have within themselves remarkable individual talents, and they will likely surprise you as they become masters of playful learning. As Maria Montessori said (1914, p. 130), "In fact, our little ones have the impression of continually 'making discoveries' in the world about them; and in this they find the greatest joy."

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Reference

Montessori, M. (1914/1965). *Dr. Montessori's own handbook*. New York: Schocken Books.

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