

In honour of *Play*



Children need play. That is the bottom line. There are two types of play: independent play and parent participatory play. I remember the feelings of trepidation as we allowed my nephew to play in the adjacent forest with his friends. It felt risky, even irresponsible, but it was the right thing to do and fostered the development of my nephew. He has grown up to be a responsible young man of twenty who knows the difference between foolish risk and growthful risk that allows one to develop into a mature adult. In terms of participatory play, I remember endless games of hide and seek in total darkness in my home. I was ready but never prepared for my kids to jump out at the most unexpected times and frighten me half to death.

How do experts describe these two types of play? Dr. Peter Gray sees the historical function of play as the means where children learn to become adults. It is the means by which they “solve their own problems, control their own lives, develop their own interests, and become competent in pursuit of

their own interests” (*Psychology Today*, January 26, 2010). If children are deprived of free independent play, is it any wonder that they develop anxiety and depression due to being unable to connect with the essence of who they are. In some cases, parents are fearful of the danger that children may experience during free play. This is understandable; however, it is through these experiences that children find joy and begin to define who they are. Dr. David Whitebread, a developmental cognitive psychologist, reinforces the idea that adventurous outdoor play can offer children the opportunity to test their physical limits and shared play allows them to form and work through conflicts with their peers as they play together.

It is the brave and thoughtful parent that gives their child these valuable opportunities of growth.

Another element of play is play that is participatory with the parent. Key thoughts from *The Genius of Play* (October 2015) on the parent role in child play are:

- can happen anytime without props
- helps with parent bonding which is essential for child attachment
- fosters creativity and social skills
- following the child’s lead gives them permission to direct and control
- devices should be shelved during play time; play demands 100% attention

What a joy it is to play with your child as they direct the experience and you hear her/him say, “Dad you be _____ and I will be _____”. Or, “Mum, can you be the goalie and I will take shots at you?” Every child needs their parents to be free of all distractions as they prioritize the time to play with their child. The joy on a child’s face as parents play with them is every indication of how much these times mean to children. The parent attachment and bonding they gain, the sense of self-worth that is established, and the ability to make mistakes without correction all help grow that independent and confident child we all pray our child(ren) becomes.