

Play is the WAY!

The Power of Play with developmental psychologist, author, speaker, consultant and faculty member at the Neufeld Institute, Deborah MacNamara, Ph.D. Understanding what play is and isn't is fundamental to understanding the many benefits play has on healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development. According to Dr. MacNamara, play should not be confused with work because play:

- is *expressive* – play comes from within; it is not something that can be input.
- is freedom – encourages voice and choice, newness, and an exploration of the novel and new which invites imagination and creativity and provides the brain with the opportunity to enter a state of cognitive rest which invites even more creativity.
- is *engaging* – play invites spontaneity in following the moment. There is no judgement or criteria that shapes the outcome of play. Play just is.
- is *emotionally safe* – play enables the creation of safe inner and outer pretend worlds where kids (and adults) can activate and discharge emotions without relational repercussions. This is critical for the development of healthy social and emotional skills and an overall sense of well-being.
- is not *work* – play is not oriented toward a specific future-oriented outcome or goal like work is. There are no concepts of right or wrong in play.

Dr. MacNamara says that it's important to know the difference between work and play because play "is essential in the unfolding of a child" and that without a healthy dose of play in our development, we won't figure out who we are. "Bents" in play when we are young can become passions and inspire future pathways. Any activity can be made into play or work. Take eating, for example. When prepare and eat food because we need nourishment to sustain our bodies – that's work. However, if we are preparing and eating food pure enjoyment and exploration of taste sensations and textures – that's play because there is no expected outcome. As we grow up and work takes over more and more of our lives, there is a perception that we lose our ability to play. This is a misconception because play is an instinct that never leaves us – we are born to play not just as children but as adults, too. As we age, we simply become more consumed with the functions and outcomes of our work. Our adult need for work impacts our ability or willingness to allow our children to play. Just because we need to work most of the time does not mean our children should also work all the time. When we tell our children to go play, but never play *with* them or model what it means to play, we rob our children and ourselves of important opportunities to nurture strong parent-child attachments which are essential for healthy development.

Dr. MacNamara speaks about how overscheduled children are today, which can adversely affect healthy child development and relationships if there is no time to allow for unstructured play. Ever hear your child say they are bored when there's "nothing to do"? Boredom can be a sign that a child is struggling because they have a play deficit and don't know how to be in the moment without someone or something else telling them what to do.

Believe in the value of play as a part of healthy child development. The International Baccalaureate also endorses play as a primary driver for inquiry and as integral to helping children develop a sense of agency – the ability to be active participants in their own lives with the capacity to initiate action. "Through play, young children develop approaches to learning and connect with key domains of their development:

- Receptive and cognitive abilities (for example, listening, remembering, thinking, analyzing, generating theories, the control of attention and working memory)
- Representational abilities (for example, using symbolic systems – such as oral and written language, drawing and mathematical symbols – to construct and represent meaning)
- Relational abilities "(for example, the ability to play with peers, sharing and taking turn, and respecting others)" (*PYP Principles into Practice*, "The Early Learner" p. 6).

Dr. MacNamara cited research that shows that children who engage in lots of *true play* in their early and formative years are more cognitively successful by Grade 3 than peers who did not engage in a healthy amount of play. Play is a natural state that is essential to healthy child development. Kids who play become adults who are happier and more successful. We need to play at school and at home to ignite creativity, revitalize the spirit, and build emotional resilience. However, if we are not mindful about intentionally making room for play by consciously setting up rituals at home and school that support our children will pay the emotional and relationship costs later in life.

As Dr. MacNamara said, "PLAY IS THE WAY!" For more information on Dr. MacNamara and her work on play, please visit her [website](#).