

Why Children Need Free Play

–Especially with Other Children

I. Here are six valuable lessons children learn in free play—play that they create themselves, without adults.



1. In play, children learn to initiate and direct their own activities and solve their own problems.

It is how they become increasingly independent, ready for success in life.



2. In play, children learn how to get along with peers.

They learn to compromise, negotiate, and attend to others' needs.



3. In play, children learn to create and follow rules and to inhibit their impulses.

All play has structure—that is, rules or guidelines--and in free play children create those rules themselves and learn self-control by following them.



4. In play, children learn to regulate fear and anger rather than succumb to them.

When children play in moderately risky ways, they learn to control their fear and develop courage. Sometimes children get angry in play with others, but to keep playing they learn to regulate that anger.



5. In play, children develop their capacities for creativity, imagination, and reasoning.

Play is always creative and, especially for young children, it is usually highly imaginative. In their fantasy play, children practice logical thinking. “If I were a dog, I could only bark, not talk.” That is the birth of high-level reasoning.

6. In play, children discover what they like to do and become good at it.

They discover and pursue their passions and, in the process, develop confidence and a can-do attitude.

II. Free play is the primary means by which children satisfy the three basic psychological needs that are essential for happiness and mental health for all people. These are the needs for *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*.

1. Autonomy:

Research reveals that people of all ages are happier, emotionally healthier, and perform better when free to make their own decisions. Play, by definition, is something a child freely chooses. It is the primary expression of freedom for children and the primary way they learn to make decisions.

2. Competence:

Mental health requires not only being able to make one’s own decisions but also competence to carry them out. Children play at real-world activities that interest them, and in the process, they become skilled at those activities.

3. Relatedness:

As social beings, children need a strong sense of connection and friendship, not just with parents and other adults but also with peers. Play is the primary means by which children connect with peers. For children under age 12, a friend is, almost by definition, someone you play with.

For more information about why free play is essential to children’s healthy development, see:

[Insert website URL and QR code for page that will elaborate on these ideas and will have links to articles.]

Also see the following sites:

List play resources here.