



The Healing Power of Play: Using Play to Foster Connection, Regulation, and Growth

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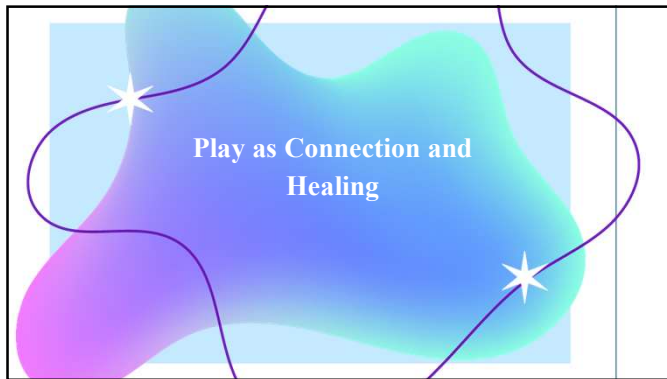


Objectives

1. Describe how play naturally supports healing and connection.
2. Explain how play engages the brain and body to promote regulation, integration, and growth.
3. Apply play-based strategies to foster trust, co-regulation, and resilience in children and families.



"We don't stop playing because we grow old; We grow old because we stop playing."
-George Bernard Shaw



History of Play		
Era	Key Idea	Example
Ancient Greece	Play as imitation, competition, chance and uncertainty in life	Games, sports, pretend rituals
Enlightenment & Romantic thought	Play as imagination and creativity	Storytelling, pretend play
Early childhood education movement (Froebel)	Play as the basis of learning	Kindergarten, blocks, songs
Scientific & developmental psychology	Play studied as development	Observational play research
Contemporary perspectives	Play supports wellbeing and relationships	Therapy, digital play, family play

Adapted from Frost et al., 2012

- It is freely chosen.
- It is intrinsically motivates.
- It values means over ends.
- It involves multiple positive affects.
- It is personally directed.
- It includes nonliterality/pretense.
- It includes flexibility.

Kaduson & Shaefer, 2021

Play Fosters Human Development and Wellbeing

"Play is essential for a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. It helps them learn to process the world."

(Quinn & Bongiorno, 2021, para. 5)

PLAY IS ESSENTIAL

Play and the Body

- Increases blood flow to the brain
- Improves lung performance
- Strengthens the heart
- help strengthen and expand networks of connections in their developing brains
- Play may have an adaptive purpose, providing a survival advantage
- Neurotransmitter released: dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins
- Activates the whole neocortex or front part of the brain and builds new circuits in the prefrontal cortex
- Cognitive development

(Kemple et al., 2016; Sivi, 2016; Wang & Aamodt, 2012)

LET'S PLAY!

play builds brains

sensory system
may engage multiple senses, forming neural networks that become the foundation for all future learning

spatial processing
may activate the hippocampus, where the brain maps out surroundings

social connections
may activate the brain's mirror neuron system, boosting empathy and social navigation skills

problem solving
Play engages the prefrontal cortex and improves critical thinking and problem-solving

creativity
Play engages multiple brain areas to allow children to come up with new ideas and ways to explore the world

resilience
Play builds sturdy brain architecture, supporting lifelong health and the ability to overcome challenges

Learn more at cdec.org/play

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Play can be Healing

- Express thoughts, experiences, and feelings
- Work through trauma
- Regain a sense of control
- Develop coping skills
- Enhance wellbeing and emotional wellness
- Cathartic
- Symbolic/Projection
- Communication
- Enhance social relationships
- Increase personal strengths/self-regulation
- Powerful healing force for overcoming psychopathology

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Play Deprivation

- 1996 at UT, sniper, 27-story tower and shot 44 people.
 - No time to play as a child and history of home violence and trauma.
 - 90% of convicted murderers in Texas showed absence of childhood play or abnormal play.
- Another study, 75% of drunk drivers who killed themselves or others while driving, had play abnormalities.

- Difficulty interacting with others and may have poor resilience
- Can damage early child development, leading to long-term issues such as isolation, depression, and reduced self-control.
- Learning and academic challenges
- Obesity
- Greater tendencies to addiction
- Lead to fragile and shallower interpersonal relationships
- Lifelong effects on children

(Brown, 1994, 2009, as cited in Frost et al., 2012)

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Birds Fly, Fish Swim, and Kids Play

Dr. Gary Landreth

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- Attachment
- Emotional Connection
- Relational Safety in children and families



Play helps children connect with caregivers, build trust, and feel secure

Frost et al., 2012

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Reflect
Recall a meaningful childhood play experience

Pair/Table Share
Discuss:

- What created connection or safety?
- How did play shape emotions or regulation?

Group Debrief
Identify key themes:

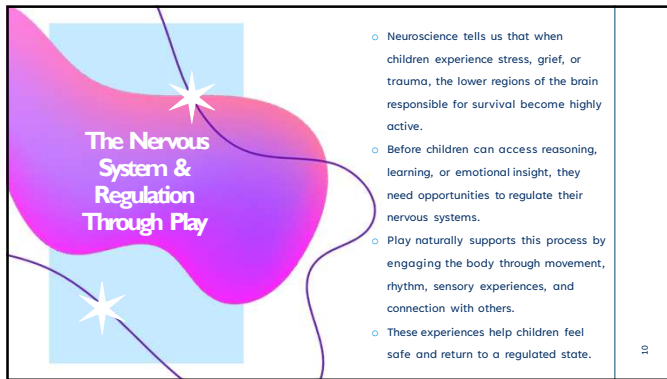
- Attachment
- Trust-building
- Emotional regulation

Activity:
Remembering Play

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The Brain, Body, and Regulation Through Play

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The Nervous System & Regulation Through Play

- Neuroscience tells us that when children experience stress, grief, or trauma, the lower regions of the brain responsible for survival become highly active.
- Before children can access reasoning, learning, or emotional insight, they need opportunities to regulate their nervous systems.
- Play naturally supports this process by engaging the body through movement, rhythm, sensory experiences, and connection with others.
- These experiences help children feel safe and return to a regulated state.

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Play, Emotional Processing & Integration

- Play is a developmentally appropriate language through which children express thought and feelings that may be difficult to verbalize (Ginsburg, 2007).
- Research suggests that play promotes resilience, reduces stress, and supports healthy social-emotional development (Ginsburg, 2007).
- During play, children practice coping skills, problem-solving, emotional expression, and social connection.
- For grieving children, play can provide a safe outlet to explore memories, feelings, and experiences while maintaining a sense of control.
- Play support integration between emotional, sensory, cognitive, and relational experiences, strengthening neural pathways involved in regulation.

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Co-Regulation Through Play Activity

Let's Try it!

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Applying Play-Based Strategies in Practice

Clinical

- Play therapy
- Therapeutic play
- Directive & non-directive play
e.g., sand tray, puppets, structured games, bubbles, aggressive toys, nurturing toys, expressive materials, toys that support imaginative play

Caregiving

- Everyday relational play
- Emotional role-play
- Shared imaginative play
e.g., peek-a-boo, pretend school, storytelling

Community

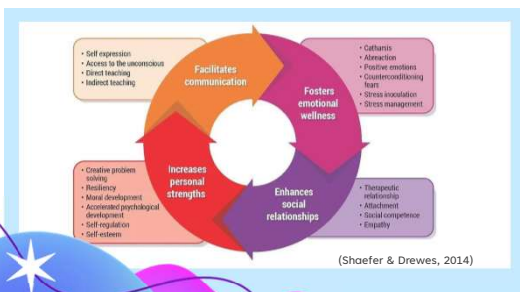
- Group & cooperative play
- Inclusive social play
- Creative expression
- Independent & exploratory play
e.g., team games, group storytelling, creative exploration, play ground play



PLAY HEALS

Play Therapy is the structured use of play by trained professionals to help children express emotions, work through difficulties, and support healthy development (Association for Play Therapy, n.d.)

Therapeutic Powers of Play





Play May Bring ALL of us Renewal and Joy

1. Go outside
2. Break the screen cycle (model the behavior)
3. Provide opportunities for open-ended play
4. Add family play time into routines
5. Add play in your own life

(Quinn & Bongiorno, 2021)



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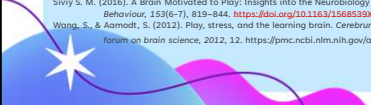
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Thank You!
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