



Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired Outreach Programs

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Play is Not Just Child's Work

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2025 Texas Symposium on Deafblind Education
Convergence: Embracing New Beginnings with Presence and Connections

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Learning Objectives

- List at least five characteristics of play.
- Explain how play is connected to and important for learning.
- Identify at least three play-based strategies to facilitate play for children who are deafblind.

What is play?

What is play to you?

Pediatrician, Jack Shonkoff, M.D.

- Play is
 - interactive
 - self-directed
 - driven by curiosity
 - driven by a desire to master the environment
 - universal
 - a safe way to be in the world and figure things out

(Pfitzer, S. 2022)

Psychiatrist, Stuart Brown, M.D.

- Psychiatrist, Stuart Brown, M.D.
 - Apparently purposeless (done for its own sake)
 - Voluntary
 - Inherent attraction
 - Freedom from time
 - Diminished consciousness of self
 - Improvisational potential
 - Continuation desire

(Brown, S. 2009)

Occupational Therapist, Linda Florey

- “Play is a complex set of behaviors characterized by fun and spontaneity.
- Play can be sensory, neuromuscular, cognitive, and any combination of the three
- Play involves repetition of experience, exploration, experimentation, and imitation of one’s surroundings.”

(Florey, L. 1981)

LEGO Foundation (2024)

- Joyful
- Actively engaging
- Iterative
- Meaningful
- Socially interactive

How is play connected to and important for learning?

We are built for play

- Play begins within the first few weeks of life
 - Eye contact
 - Social smile
 - Attunement (synchronized neural activity)

(Brown, 2009)

Very Young Infant’s Jobs

- Attach and bond with caregivers
- Sensory organization
- Issues with sensory access can cause disconnect or mixed signals
 - Disrupt attachment and bonding
 - Creates stress and a sense of being incompetent
 - Sensory differences can create challenges of being over or understimulated
 - Decrease incidental learning (looking and listening for information)

(Anthony, 2023)

- Bodily-tactile access becomes incredibly important if not a primary source of access to the environment
- Movement is critical to make sense of the environment,
 - Must create a safe environment

What does play do?

- Neural development enhances brain structure
- Social interaction skills
- Attunement
- Self-regulation
- Executive function
- Builds resilience
- Cognitive development
- Communication

(Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2018)

ADULT ROLE

- Achieve attunement
 - Co-presence
 - Co-regulation
- Remain playful and have fun too because
 - ATTUNEMENT
- Provide structure
 - Routine
 - Feeling of safety – knowing what will happen - anticipation

The Brain on Play

Brain research tells us that when the fun stops, learning often stops too.

Reticular Activating System (RAS)

RAS is engaged when things are stimulating and challenging (Willis, 2007)

Information Pathway

- Information passes through the RAS in the brainstem – the gatekeeper of attention
- Sensory information is sent to the relevant somatosensory parts of the brain.
- Almost simultaneously, the information passes through the limbic system imbuing it with emotion and it is stored as a memory.

(Willis, 2007; Rueda, Moyano, and Rico-Pico, 2021; Fernández-Espejo, 2000)

Balanced Amygdala

Students who are

- Engaged + motivated = minimal stress + higher-level cognition
- Pleasurable activity = brain break = neurotransmitters rebuild = ready for more learning

(Willis, 2007)

Building Resilience Through Play

- Three concepts stand out about development:
 1. Importance of supportive relationships
 2. Need to reduce significant sources of stress
 3. Building core skills (skills that are needed to have success in just about everything we do in our lives.)
 - This is tied to active play and interaction.
 - You cannot become resilient in a vacuum. You have to be willing to be nurtured in at least one supportive relationship.
- (Pfitzer, S. 2022)

Play-based Strategies

Interactions and Opportunities

- Follow the child's lead
- Serve and return
- Adult facilitated play
- Structured peer play
- **Free play**
- Accessible environments

- Preferred topics
- Music

Interaction Drives Development

- We are active agents in our own development by engaging in serve and return interactions
- It's that back-and-forth interaction – active engagement – between the child and the adult with each playing a role – that's how development happens

(Pfitzer, 2020.)

Following the Child's Lead

- Van Dijk
 - Resonance
- Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University
 - Serve and return
- Nielsen
 - Active Learning
- Gunnar Vege
 - "The interested person becomes the person of interest."

Embracing Learning Through Play

- Empower students to guide their own learning.
- Create a culture of collaborative learning together.
- Encourage risk-taking and experimentation,
- Promote imaginative thinking.
- Accept the different emotions that play can create.

(Ross, 2023)

Music

- Lights up the brain
 - Limbic system
 - Amygdala
 - Hippocampus

(Eck, 2024)

Early Childhood Activities

(Inspired by *Activities Guide: Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence*)

Birth to three months

- Play Activity
 - Social Smiling
 - Babbling/verbal games
 - Peek-a-boo
 - This little piggy
- Benefits
 - Co-presence
 - Serve and return interaction
 - Attunement
 - Self-regulation
 - Impulse control

- Anticipation/prediction
- Communication

Four to nine months

- Play Activity
 - Object play
 - Rolling over
 - Continued social play
- Benefits
 - Fine motor skills
 - Problem-solving
 - Gross motor control

A Word About Hand-Under-Hand

- Active touch = active attention
- Hand-under-hand = Pay attention to what the hand is doing and experiencing
- Hand-over-hand = Pay attention to the hand that is pulling

Nine to twelve months

- Play Activity
 - Cruising
 - Walking
 - Rough and tumble play
 - More complex object play
- Benefits
 - Locomotion/Gross motor
 - Exploration
 - Object permanence

12 to 48 months

- Play Activity
 - Explore the world
 - Rough and tumble play
 - Parents are “home base”
- Benefits
 - Problem-solving
 - Focus attention
 - Secure attachment
 - Begin managing strong emotions

48 months and up

- Play Activity
 - Pretend play
 - More complex object play
 - Games with rules
- Benefits
 - Begin practicing social interactions
 - Discrimination
 - Categorization

Benefits of Play

(Based on *The Importance of Play for Adults*)

Emotional and Health Benefits

- Cope with stress
- Release endorphins
- Reduce cortisol
- Fosters relaxation

Cognitive Advantages

- Sharpens mental acuity
- Promotes creativity
- Promotes problem-solving
- Cognitive flexibility
- Enhanced memory
- Slows memory loss
- Reduces risk of dementia

Social Connections

- Strengthens bonds
- Fosters empathy
- Builds trust
- Allows intimacy
- Promotes a sense of belonging
- Reduces feelings of isolation

Cultivating a Playful Mindset

- Attitude, attitude, attitude
- Curiosity
- Humor
- Openness

If you are having fun, those around you will too.

If you are bored, those around you will be too.

(Remember attunement.)

Resources

- Harvard Center on the Developing Child
 - [The Brain Architects | Podcasts](#)
 - Video – [Building Babies' Brains Through Play](#)
 - [Activities Guide: Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence](#)
- [National Institute for Play](#)
 - Stuart Brown: [Play is more than just fun | TED Talk](#)
 - Play Note (December 2024): [The Importance of Play for Adults](#)
- Literacy
 - Linda Hagood: [Playing with Words](#)
 - APH: [Laptime Songs](#)
- Interaction videos

- [Interactions and Connections: Following Your Child's Lead with Your Conversations](#)
- [How every child can thrive by five](#) (TED Talk)

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