

Plug Into Play –

Charging Your Child's Development and Your Connection

- Let every moment of play nourishes your child's growth and strengthens your parent-child bond

Dr LAM Pui Ching Jessie
Department of Early Childhood Education
The Education University of Hong Kong



01

How play recharges children

- Exploring how play affects brain development and regulates emotions

02

Rethinking behavioral problems

- Seeing children's "behavioral problems" from a new perspective

03

Becoming a play facilitator

- Learning how to support instead of directing children's play

04

Possibilities at home

- Exploring the playful potentials of various materials

05

Addressing behavioral challenges

- Using play to process parenting problems

06

Recharge your parent-child bond

- Building long-term positive parent-child relationship

What is Play?



Why can play “recharge” children?

Play is the natural language for children’s learning. It transcends verbal communication, becoming children’s most instinctive way to explore the world and understand own selves and others. When children immerse themselves in play, their brains are forming millions of neural connections at unprecedented speeds, laying a solid biological foundation for future learning, emotional regulation, and social skills.

(Learning Through Play, 2021)

How Play Shapes the Brain



Cognitive Development

Play can stimulate creative thinking, problem-solving skills, and logical reasoning, enhancing activity in the brain's executive function areas.



Emotional Regulation

Through play, children learn to recognize, express, and manage their emotions, developing healthy coping mechanisms for emotional responses.



Communication and Collaboration

Through shared play, children learn to listen, express themselves, negotiate, and cooperate, developing essential social skills.

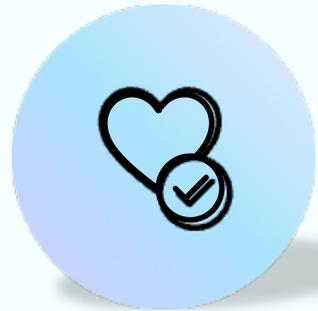
(Family Action, 2025)



The Moment of Immersion

Pay attention to your child playing with attention, creative expression, and independent exploration — these are all signs that the child's brain is developing.

Core Life Skills Cultivated through Play



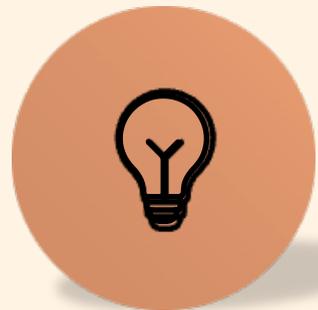
Emotional Intelligence

Recognize and manage the emotions of own self and others



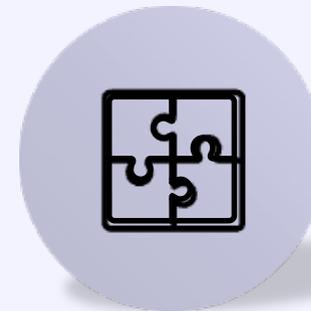
Communication and expression

Clearly express one's thoughts; effectively listen to others



Creative Thinking

Think outside the box, seek innovative solutions



Problem-solving ability

Stay calm and flexible when encounter challenges

The Unique Value of Three Major Types of Play

1

Physical Play

Running, jumping, and climbing aren't just about burning off energy — they're crucial for developing spatial awareness, risk assessment, and physical coordination. Through physical play, children learn to understand their own limits and capabilities.

2

Imaginative Play

Role-playing and pretend play allow children to try on different identities, understand others' perspectives, and develop empathy. It's a natural classroom for social-emotional learning.

3

Constructive Play

Stack, assemble, create — constructive play cultivates spatial reasoning, planning skills, and perseverance. Each attempt is a journey of scientific exploration.

Let's think together

Over the past week, have you noticed what kind of play your child was most interested in?

What were their expressions, movements, and language like at that time?

Take a few minutes to share your observations with the parents around you. These moments of engagement are precisely when learning happens.



Common Myths about Play

✘ Myth 1

"Play is a waste of time; studying is what matters."

FACT: Play is the most effective way for children to learn. Research confirms that free play enhances academic performance.

✘ Myth 2

"Play requires expensive toys and equipment."

FACT: The best play often comes with simple materials — boxes, towels, kitchen utensils — all can spark boundless creativity.

✘ Myth 3

"I must teach my child how to play properly."

FACT: Children are born players. What they need is space and freedom, not instructions and control.

Rethinking “Behavioral Problems”

When children exhibit challenging behavior, perhaps they are telling us:



“I need a different way to recharge.”

The Needs behind the Behavior



Behavior is communication.

Every action conveys a message. When we learn to interpret these messages, we can use play to meet children's true needs.

- Hyperactivity → Requires more physical play
- Inattention → Requires more engaging challenges
- Aggressive behavior → Requires an outlet for emotional expression
- Withdrawn and shy → Requires a safe space for exploration

Transitioning from “Problem” to “Need”

1

Observe behavior

Observe what your child is doing without judgment

2

Identify needs

Reflect on the potential needs that underlying the behavior

3

Design play

Create a play experience that meets this need

4

Observe changes

Pay attention to your child's reactions and behavioral changes

Case Study Analysis

Scenario: Always Interrupt Conversations

Traditional response:
“Don’t cut in! Let me finish!”

Play Perspective:
Children may need more opportunities to express themselves. Try the “Take Turns Talking” game — use a fun signal stick to pass the speaking turn, making waiting time enjoyable.

Scenario: Refuse to Tidy Up Toys

Traditional response:
“Tidy up immediately, or I'll throw the toys away!”

Play Perspective:
Turn tidying up into a game - “Let's race to see who can find the red toys fastest!” or “Pretend the toys are going home to sleep.”

Your role:

Play Facilitator

Not a director,
Not a teacher,
But a supporter and observer.



What is a Play Facilitator?

Playwork Theory

The British theory of play emphasizes that adults' role is to create a safe, stimulating environment and then step back, allowing children to take the lead in their own play.

This is not neglect, but rather conscious companionship and timely support.

(PPSG, 2005)

Core Principles

- Children are experts at their own play.
- Free choice is more valuable than structured activities.
- "Risk" is part of learning.
- Adults should observe more than intervene.

Two Completely Different Approaches

Directive Parenting

"Come on, I'll show you how to play this."

"Not in this way. This is how it should be done."

"Let's assemble it according to the manual."

"This is too dangerous. You can't do that."

Result: Children become dependent on instructions, lack autonomy, and have limited creativity.

Guided Parenting

"Wow, what are you building?"

"Try it and see what happens?"

"How do you think we can solve this problem?"

"I see you want to climb high. I will be at your side."

Outcome: Children develop self-confidence, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

Seeing the Differences

Let's compare how these two approaches impact children's play experiences and learning outcomes.

Pay attention to children's body language, facial expressions, and level of engagement — these subtle differences reveal the profound impact of different approaches.



The Five Principles for Play Facilitators

1. Observation first

Before intervening, take time to observe. You'll be surprised how many problems children can solve on their own.

2. Ask questions rather than give orders

Open-ended questions spark deeper thinking: "What do you think will happen next?" is more powerful than "Do this."

3. Follow your child's interests

Let your child direct the play, even if it strays from your plan.

4. Expansion, not control

When the child needs it, provide new materials or ideas instead of changing the entire game.

5. Celebrate the process, not the outcome

Praise effort and exploration: "You tried many approaches" carries more meaning than "Good job."

(Casey & Robertson, 2019)

Guided Language Demonstration



"I noticed
you used three
different colors.
Tell me what
you were
thinking?"

"This part has
collapsed.
Think of ways
to make it
more stable."

"You seem
pretty absorbed
in this game.
Need help finding
more materials?"

Demonstration Time

Invite a parent to come up on stage.

Let's practice using guided language in a real-life scenario. I'll play the role of the child. Please respond to me using the techniques we learned today.

Treasure at Home

The best toys can be found anywhere.



What are Loose Parts?

Architect Simon Nicholson proposed the “Loose Materials Theory” in 1971: materials that can be moved, combined, redesigned, and dismantled inspire the greatest creativity and exploration.

Unlike toys with fixed functions, loose materials have no “correct” way to play, allowing them to adapt to a child's current needs and imagination.

(Nicholson, 1971)

❏ Why is it so effective?

When materials are used freely, children must engage their creativity, planning, and problem-solving skills. This cognitive challenge is precisely the key to brain development.

Play materials found everywhere around the house



Kitchenware

Pots and pans, wooden spoons, funnels, measuring cups—each one is a perfect tool for scientific exploration and role-playing.



Paper boxes and cartons

Shipping boxes, shoe boxes, toilet paper rolls—they can become houses, cars, robots, musical instruments.



Small items

Buttons, clothespins, strings, bottle caps—treasures for fine motor development and sorting games.



Fabric textiles

Old bed sheets, towels, scarves—they can become tents, superhero capes, doll blankets, magic blankets.



Natural materials

Stones, sticks, pinecones, shells—bringing endless possibilities for tactile exploration, mathematical discovery, and artistic expression.



Container

Bins, baskets, trays—for sorting, transporting, and building, fostering organizational skills.



Unlimited Creativity: Examples of Loose Materials

See how children transform ordinary objects into extraordinary play worlds. Notice their focus, how they collaborate, and their problem-solving process.

Source of Pictures:

<https://alunoon.com/preschool/activities.php?c=1535>

<https://littlebinsforlittlehands.com/edible-structures-for-snack-time-stem/>

Safe Use of Loose Materials

- **Consider age appropriateness**
Avoid small objects for children under 3 years old; choose large, safe materials. As children grow older, gradually introduce more complex materials.
- **Establish clear boundaries**
Discuss with your child what items are okay to play with and which are not. For example: "Plastic kitchen utensils are okay, but glass cups are not."
- **Regularly check the status**
Ensure materials are clean and undamaged. Replace damaged or soiled items promptly.
- **Accompanying, not monitoring**
Stay nearby, but don't hover constantly. Moderate risk is part of the learning process.

(Casey & Robertson, 2019)

Interactive Time

Now I'll bring out some items, and let's imagine together—
What could these things become in a child's world of play?

There are no wrong answers, only infinite possibilities.
Let's think like children!

Creating a Play Area at Home



Set up a resource station

Use several boxes or baskets to categorize and store different types of loose materials. Place them where children can easily access them.



Regularly rotate materials

Replace some materials weekly or monthly to maintain freshness and spark curiosity.



Preserve open space

No need for a dedicated playroom. A corner of the living room, the corridor, or even under the dining table can become a play area.



Showcase Game Achievements

Document children's creations through photographs or physical pieces. Allow children to witness their own growth.

Recommended Materials for Different Age Groups

1–2 years old

Large building blocks, fabric, large containers, safety mirrors, tactile materials (such as pasta, rice)

1

5–6 years old

Construction materials, scientific experiment supplies, complex puzzles, art supplies, writing instruments

3

3–4 years old

Paper boxes, clothing accessories, kitchenware, simple tools, natural materials, art supplies

2

Ages 7 and up

Electronic components, woodworking tools (under supervision), sewing supplies, complex construction kits

4

When Play Meets Behavioral Challenges

How to Use Play to Address Your Child's Specific Needs

Challenge One: Hyperactivity, inability to sit still

The needs behind the behavior

A child's body craves plenty of physical activities and sensory stimulation. Forcing them to sit still increases frustration and resistance.

Playful Solution

- indoor obstacle course (pillows, chairs, fabric)
- animal imitation game
- dance party
- "the floor is lava" game
- pushing and pulling heavy objects (laundry baskets, boxes)



 **Crucial timing:** Allow 20 minutes of active playtime before requesting the child to settle down (e.g., for meals or homework).

Challenge Two: Emotional Outbursts and Tantrums

1

Preventive Play

Build an “Emotional Toolbox”: Teach children to play deep breathing games, squeeze modeling clay, and draw pictures to express their feelings during calm moments.

2

Current Play Intervention

Provide sensory comfort materials (water, sand, clay) or spaces for physical release (pillows to punch, newspapers to tear).

3

Post-play processing

Use dolls or drawing to reenact situations, helping children understand and process their emotions. “Let's use toys to act out what just happened.”

Challenge Three: Reluctance to Share or Take Turns



Development Perspective

Before age three, children are still developing the concepts of “yours” and “mine.” Forcing sharing may backfire.

Play Strategy

- Provide multiple similar toys
- Use a timer to gamify taking turns
- Role-playing scenario sharing
- Praise any attempt to share
- Create games that require cooperation

Challenge Four: Aggressive Behavior (Hitting, Biting)

Understand the reasons

Typically, it stems from language limitations, boundary testing, or sensory needs. They're not "bad kids"—it's a developmental stage.

Play Export

Provide objects that can be "attacked": large pillows, punching bags, tearable paper. "I see you're very angry. Come hit this pillow."

Power Play

Tug-of-war, wall-pushing contests, arm wrestling—safely satisfying the need to demonstrate strength.

Bite Alternative

Provide chewable toys, frozen towels, and durable rubber toys to satisfy oral needs.

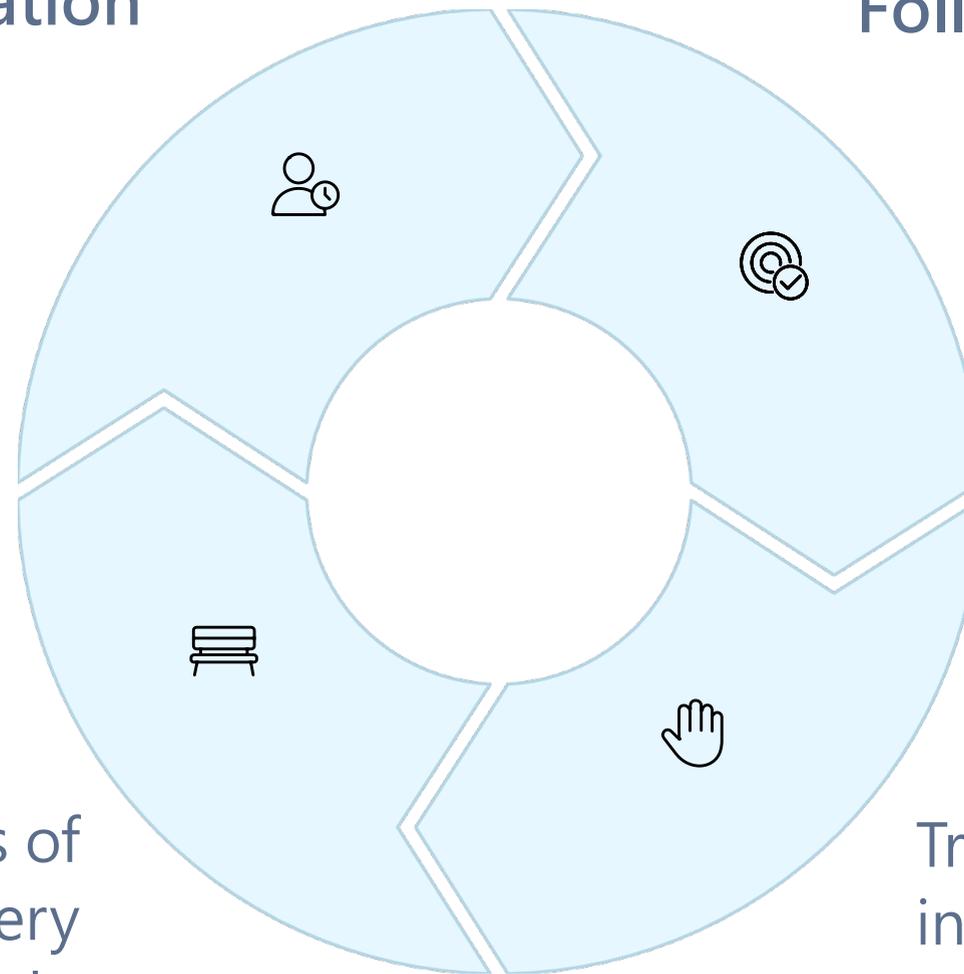
Challenge Five: Attention Issues

Assess the duration

Ensure expectations align with age (approximately 5–10 minutes for age 3, 15–20 minutes for age 6).

Arrange exercise break

Schedule 5 minutes of dynamic activity every 15-20 minutes to help the brain refocus.



Follow child's interests

Is your child fascinated by dinosaurs? Use dinosaurs as a theme to integrate all kinds of learning.

Learning by doing

Transform static activities into interactive games. Use blocks for math, word cards for language games.

Challenge 6: Conflicts between Siblings

Prevention Strategies

- Ensure every child has their own space and belongings.
- Design games that require cooperation
- Celebrate moments of positive interaction
- Arrange special one-on-one time



Play Intervention During Conflict

- "Play Court": Using puppets to act out solutions
- Team Challenge: Complete tasks together to win rewards
- Creative mediation: "draw your own solution"
- Take turns being the "director" to lead the play

The Art of Play Intervention

Observation Phase

Let's not intervene for now and see if the children can resolve it on their own.

Intervention Phase

Intervene only when safety is at risk or conflicts escalate..

Support Phase

Provide tools or suggestions, but do not take over.

Reflection Phase

Using play to process emotions and learn afterward

Most of the time, we should remain in the observation and support phases. Over-involvement deprives children of opportunities to develop problem-solving skills.

Establish a Play Routine

Integrate play into daily life, making them a part of the family culture.



Morning Playtime

Fifteen minutes of free play before breakfast sets the tone for the day.



Transition Play

Use brief games to ease transitions between activities (such as going home after school).



Bedtime Play Ritual

Quiet imaginative play or storytelling helps you relax.



Weekend Exploration Time

Longer, more open-ended exploration play, whether you're out and about or at home.

Recharge Your Parent-Child Bond

Make play the heart of parent-child relationship

How Play Strengthens Parent-Child Bonds

Emotional connection

Shared play creates happy memories and secure attachments.



Communication bridge

Children are more willing to share their thoughts and feelings during play.



Mutual respect

Fostering mutual respect through an attitude of guiding rather than controlling



Trust building

Respecting a child's choice of play conveys "I trust you."



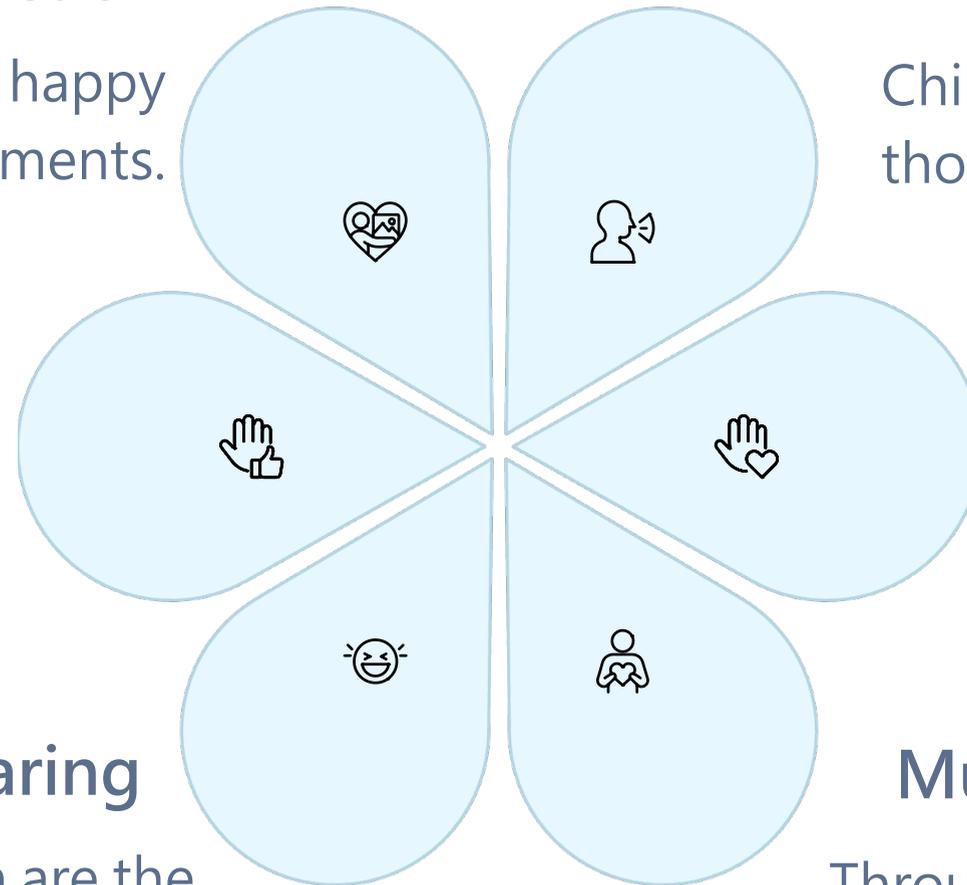
Joy sharing

Laughter and fun are the strongest relationship glue.



Mutual understanding

Through play, we glimpse children's world and thoughts.



Five Minutes of Special Time Each Day

Research shows that 5 to 10 minutes of one-on-one playtime each day builds stronger bonds than a single extended activity once a week. (Driscoll, Wang, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2011)

How to put into practice

1. Set a fixed time (such as after dinner)
2. Let children choose their activities
3. Put away your phone and focus fully
4. Follow the child's lead
5. Enjoy the process, not the outcome

Why is it so effective?

Brief but focused moments together are more meaningful than long periods of distracted companionship. Children feel, "I matter to my parents."



Making Space for Connection



Gamifying household chores:
Folding laundry becomes a matching game; washing vegetables turns into an aqua adventure; and cleaning transforms into a "vacuum cleaner race."



Time on the road:
Play "I Spy" in the car or on the road, tell stories in turn, or sing songs.



Nighttime links:
To share daily news, looking forward to tomorrow

When you feel frustrated...

There are no perfect parents.

Some days you'll feel exhausted, lose patience, and struggle to hold back.

What matters isn't perfection, but repair – After you lose control, apologize honestly to your child, explain how you feel, then play a game together to reconnect.

This genuine interaction teaches children that emotions are normal and relationships can be repaired.



Today's Key Points

Play = Learning

It's not a waste of time, but rather the best way to develop the brain.

You are the facilitator

Observe, ask questions, and support—rather than control and command.

Simplicity is power

Everyday household items make the best play materials.

Games are bridges of communication

Use play to address the true needs behind a child's behavior.

“Recharging” depends on daily routines

A few minutes of focused attention each day is more valuable than occasional extended periods of activity.

Choose one
guiding language
to practice daily



Organize a loose
materials box and
place it where
children can easily
access it.

5 to 10 minutes a
day one-on-one
special time

Integrating a
playful perspective
into every aspect
of daily parenting

References:

Casey, T & Robertson, J. (2019). *Loose Parts Play – A Toolkit 2019 Edition*. Inspiring Scotland: Edinburgh.
<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Loose-Parts-Play-Toolkit-2019-web.pdf>

Driscoll, K. C., Mashburn, A. J., Pianta, R. C., & Wang, L. (2011). *Fostering supportive teacher child relationships: Intervention implementation in a state-funded preschool program*. *Early Education and Development*, 22, 593–619.
<https://10.1080/10409289.2010.502015>

Family Action. (May 2025). *The role of play in child development and how you can play more with your child*. Retrieved 17 Nov 2025, from <https://family-action.org.uk/self-help/role-of-play-in-child-development/>

Goodliff, G. (2018). *Young children's play and creativity: Multiple voices*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

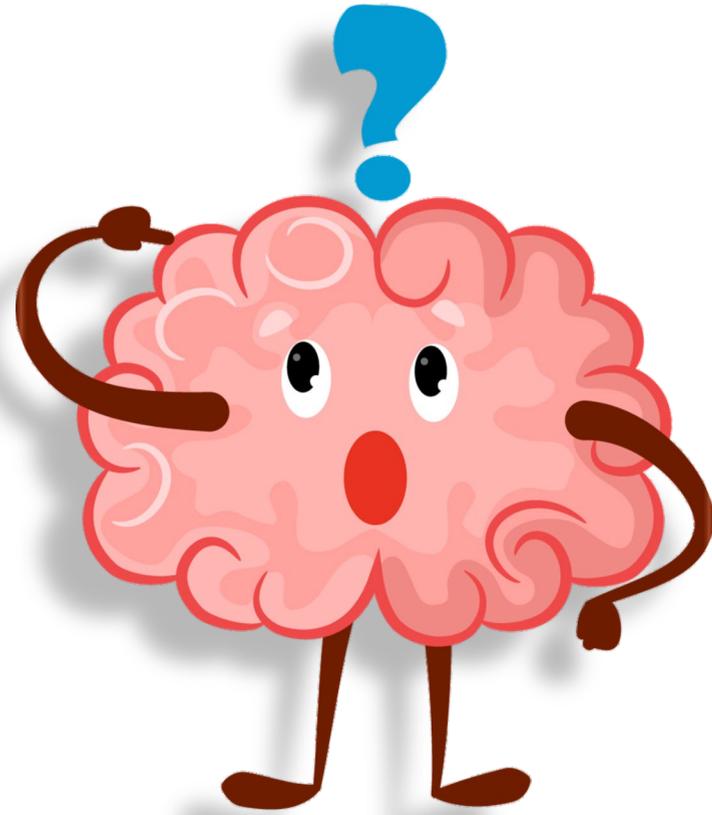
Learning Through Play. (2021). *Why Play*. <https://learningthroughplay.com/why-play>

Li, P. (Dec 2024). *Importance of Play in Child Development and Benefits*. Retrieved 15 Nov 2025, from <https://www.parentingstyles.com/child-development/play/>

Nicholson, S. (1971). *How Not To Cheat Children The Theory of Loose Parts*. *Landscape Architecture*, Volume 62, pp 30-34.
<https://media.kaboom.org/docs/documents/pdf/ip/Imagination-Playground-Theory-of-Loose-Parts-Simon-Nicholson.pdf>

PPSG (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group). (2005). *The playwork principles*. Cardiff: Play Wales. Retrieved from <https://play.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/The-Playwork-Principles-2023.pdf>

Q&A





**Thank you for
your participation!**

May the power of play energizes you and your child on the journey of growth...