

# #5for5 brief: Play



By the time a child reaches five years old, 90% of their brain has already developed – which means the progression from birth to school is the most important time of a child’s life<sup>1</sup>.

But around the world children from poorer and marginalised households are unable to access support and are put at a disadvantage. For example, those who start school at five without early years support have a limited vocabulary and ability to learn, impacting their opportunities in later life.

Theirworld’s 5 for 5 campaign focuses on the 5 elements of quality nurturing care needed by every child under five: health, nutrition, play, learning and protection. Even though the importance of these interventions has been thoroughly proven, investment in the 0 to 5 age group is still far too small.

This briefing explores the issue of play and is part of a series of briefings examining the 5 key elements of quality nurturing care, available at [theirworld.org](http://theirworld.org).

## What is play and why is it essential for healthy development?

Far from being purely fun, opportunities for play are critical for young children. Children begin learning as soon as they are born, and play is a crucial facilitator of early learning. Starting from birth, children begin to explore and learn about the world through play and interaction with adults. It is essential for healthy brain development<sup>2</sup> and research has clearly demonstrated that “playful activities benefit the development of the whole child across social, cognitive, physical, and emotional domains.”<sup>34</sup> As they grow, play teaches young children essential skills and supports the development of positive social interactions and strong emotional relationships with caregivers. In fact, play is so essential to the health and well-being of all children that the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child includes the right to engage in play and recreation.<sup>5</sup>

## What does play look like?

There are many different forms of play that children engage in during their early years and participating in a wide variety of activities is important for developing a broad range of skills.

For babies, play involves engaging all of a child’s senses – exposing them to a variety of objects to look at, touch, smell, taste, and hear; talking, singing, and reading aloud; engaging in responsive communication by looking at the baby, making faces and smiling, and responding to the child’s own sounds and actions. These “serve and return” interactions in which caregivers directly and meaningfully respond to babies’ sounds, gestures, and expressions, are vital to young children’s growth and development, forming “the foundation of brain architecture upon which all future development will be built”<sup>6</sup>

For toddlers and preschool aged children, play expands to include more

physical activities such as running and climbing, engaging with an increasing variety of objects and games, socialising with other children, and imaginative “make-believe” play.

Purchased toys and games are not essential for fun and challenging play activities. Common household items such as bowls and spoons, pillows, and boxes can just as easily serve as fun and effective playthings. Simple and even homemade toys such as blocks, dolls, old clothing, and books promote skills development and imaginative play. Parents can also engage their young children in participating in household activities such as cooking as a form of play and learning.

### **What skills does play teach?**

Play has a crucial role in early learning and development, giving children the chance to “test their ideas and learn new skills.”<sup>7</sup> Many of the skills developed through play are integral to life in the 21st century.

**Cognitive skills.** “Play builds the foundation for a lifetime of learning.”<sup>8</sup> Through play, young children gain new information about the world around them, learn how to explore new experiences and increase their own knowledge, and develop essential problem solving skills. Imaginative play also promotes creativity, curiosity, and communication skills. Play has been shown to enhance children’s learning behaviours and skills, supporting improved readiness for school.<sup>9</sup>

**Pre-literacy skills.** Play helps children develop pre-literacy and communication skills.<sup>10</sup> For babies and toddlers, communicative play with adults exposes them to new sounds and familiarises them with speech patterns.<sup>11</sup> For older toddlers, imaginative play encourages them to speak out loud, to learn new vocabulary, and to use increasingly complex speech.<sup>12</sup> Further, reading and storytelling teach children new concepts and words and promote curiosity and enjoyment of reading from an early age.

**Pre-STEM skills (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math).** Playing with a variety of objects fosters key pre-math and pre-science concepts such as shapes and colours, size and quantity, spatial awareness, and cause and effect.<sup>13</sup> And encourages children to create and test hypotheses, measure items, and classify objects into groups.<sup>14</sup> For example, dropping a cup over and over again teaches a toddler about gravity and that their action has a predictable outcome.<sup>15</sup> Finally, imaginative play promotes symbolic understanding, which is essential for both math and reading in which letters and numbers stand in for words and quantities.<sup>16</sup>

**Social skills.** Playing with both adults and peers teaches children essential social skills such as sharing, taking turns, listening to instructions, and respecting others. Imaginative play — where a child pretends to be a police officer or a parent or a chef — allows children to explore complex social interactions and to develop a better understanding of societal expectations, social relationships, and the experiences of other people.<sup>17</sup> Play also helps young children develop self-regulation and self-control, which are key to success in the classroom and the workplace.<sup>18</sup>

**Emotional skills.** Play helps to build a child’s “confidence and self-esteem as he learns to solve problems and make things happen.”<sup>19</sup> Direct nurturing engagement with a parent or other caretaker makes a child feel loved and safe, promoting closer relationships and fostering self-worth and confidence.<sup>20,21</sup> Play also reduces children’s stress and serves as a critical emotional outlet.<sup>22</sup> This is especially important for children who have undergone traumatic

experiences, such as those living through a natural disaster or conflict. In these situations, play can allow “children to revisit and understand disturbing experiences after the fact, and giving them the tools to cope with distress in the future.”<sup>23</sup>

**Physical skills.** Physical play such as running, jumping, dancing, climbing, stacking, building, and drawing promotes the development of both fine and gross motor skills, builds strong bodies, improves balance and hand-eye coordination, and promotes healthy activity. Physical activities also help children better grasp abstract concepts such as inside and outside, on top or underneath, and promote problem-solving and communication skills.<sup>24</sup>

## Is the importance of play recognised in countries around the world?

The importance of play is not recognised in many parts of the world. Many countries have seen an increased focus on formal learning activities as well as greater pressure on teachers to deliver academic results at earlier ages.<sup>25</sup> Getting the balance right is important for a healthy development, play and learning both have an important role.

Math and reading fundamentals can be learned effectively through play-based means. Numerous studies – some of which extend over decades – demonstrate the effectiveness of play-based education that combines child-initiated play with hands-on learning. For example, a study compared three pre-school models and found that children in the child-initiated learning environments showed “superior social behaviours, fewer conduct disorders, enhanced academic performance, and retention beyond children who experienced didactic, direct instruction or mixed methods (didactic instruction and play learning)”<sup>26</sup>.

## How can we support healthy play?

**Engaging adults in play.** Parents, adult caregivers, and early learning teachers play an essential role in children’s play; in fact, research suggests that children may reap the maximum benefits of play when adults support their activities.<sup>27</sup> Studies have shown that babies tend to play longer and develop better skills when playing with parents than when playing alone, and children whose parents played with them regularly as toddlers tend to have higher math and reading skills in grade five.<sup>28</sup> Young children should enjoy both opportunities for free play as well as play guided by adults. And while parents, caregivers, and teachers can guide and structure young children’s play, it is important that most play activities remain child-directed and fun.<sup>29,30</sup>

**Quality affordable childcare.** In low-resource settings, where parents may work long hours and struggle just to provide for their children’s basic physical needs, access to age-appropriate toys and the ability to prioritise learning through play can be seriously limited.<sup>31</sup> These parents and caregivers need support and increased access to early years services, including access to quality, affordable childcare and early learning programmes.<sup>32</sup>

**Caregiver Support.** Support and learning opportunities for caregivers are also critical, to help parents of all economic backgrounds and situations understand the importance of play and responsive communication and learn how they can best support the healthy early development of their babies and toddlers.

## What are the economic benefits of investing in play?

Investing in quality early childhood care that supports important elements of a child's development such as play is great for economies, and the earlier the investment in a child, the greater the long term economic return. Studies show that every \$1 invested in early childhood care and education can lead to a return of as much as \$17 for the most disadvantaged children<sup>33</sup>. Early childhood programmes have also been proven to be more effective and cost-efficient than later interventions aimed at reversing early disadvantages for adolescents or adults, such as small class sizes, adult literacy and job training, and convict rehabilitation programmes. While it is never too late to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and adults, the earliest interventions have the greatest chances of long-term impact, and support for play is an essential component of that investment<sup>34</sup>.

## Action needed:

Every country must invest in quality care for all under fives, including safe places to play, nutrition and health, protection, and early learning opportunities, with special emphasis on the poorest, most marginalised, and vulnerable children, including those living in the midst of conflict and other humanitarian crisis.

#5for5 - the 5 crucial things every child under 5 needs for the best start in life.  
Join the movement and stand up for kids who haven't mastered standing.

[www.theirworld.org](http://www.theirworld.org)

## Endnotes

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