

INTERGENERATIONAL PLAY

Question: With families gathering for the holiday season, can you offer advice about play that the whole family can enjoy? Does playing together have any special benefits for children or adults?

Intergenerational Play

In the past, three and sometimes four generations lived and played together under one roof. But today's child has on average fewer brothers and sisters, more working mothers, more single-parent households, and grandparents who may live miles away. *Parents more and more want their children to play at home, thus limiting their play with others. So playing games together with parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters is increasingly important and valuable.*

Children learn from all types of play - playing alone as well as with others. Playing together develops social skills, such as how to make friends and how to communicate clearly with playmates.

BENEFITS OF MULTI-GENERATIONAL PLAY FOR CHILDREN

The infant's first play experiences are intergenerational, when adults smile at, tickle and talk to the baby in an effort to elicit a sustained and pleasurable response. Psychologist Jerome Bruner referred to infant social games as "action dialogues", since many properties of a verbal conversation are found in games: the players focus on the same topic and co-ordinate their actions. They learn to initiate and eventually terminate the game. Rolling a ball back and forth is a simple example of play as action dialogue.

As infants develop, their social play develops with them:

Stage 1: At 6 months, babies tend to be passive; the adult must do all the work. At around 6 months the infant is able to sustain interest in the performance of the adult but remains passive.

Stage 2: At about 9 months, the infant can initiate the game but there is no evidence of taking turns in the game.

Stage 3 is shared initiative, beginning at about 1 year of age, when the infant shows awareness of the different play roles. Infants will alternate with their mothers shifting from agent to recipient.

Stage 4, in the second year, is when toddlers create variations within the game, showing an understanding not only of its basic structure, but its limits and possibilities. Examples are rolling a ball back and forth, and peek-a-boo.

The richest play occurs when adults take an active role. The most creative children are those who have had adults involved in their play. When children play with adults, they display higher levels of language and problem solving skills than when playing with their peers.

It is not only children who profit from playing with grandparents and parents. Adults benefit too.

BENEFITS OF PLAY FOR ADULTS

One of the joys of being a parent or a grandparent is the opportunity it offers to play with children. For grandparents and grandchildren, play provides the ideal setting for getting to know one another while sharing the joys of play. Parents and grandparents provide the foundation for the child's future, raise the child's self-esteem, happiness,

achievements and outlook for the future. Shared playtime is an occasion for mutual enjoyment and discovery. While playing, adults are both teachers and learners. At all times, they are role models.

Research shows that play is especially good for the elderly. Play has psychological and health benefits - it promotes relaxation, keeping the serious demands of life in perspective, thereby reducing stress. Play is not only fun and relaxing, it helps to maintain cognitive skills, like memory and problem solving, at a high level. Active games increase muscle tone, co-ordination and reaction time.

Make-believe is one form of play where adults can, if they wish, harmlessly and effortlessly influence the development of the child's social and moral values, giving lessons in co-operation, honesty and being a good loser as well as a good winner. Social play helps language development, as can be seen in a 2010 study by Doris Bergen:

Many toys have numerous features that encourage infant actions and reactions, and might promote language development, such as spoken words when toy features are activated, and features that promote activity, like a bell, a clock, dials, buttons, and levers.

Bergen and her colleagues investigated how the features of a technology-enhanced toy were used by 26 Infants and parents during six play sessions with the toy. The researchers sought to learn what features of the toy are most likely to result in child-parent play and communication, and what features of the toy result in humour and laughter.

58 children (32 boys, 26 girls) age 7 - 28 months (average age 17 months) and their parents were randomly assigned to the experimental play sessions or to the control group (no play sessions). Before beginning the play sessions, each child was evaluated for language using an infant and toddler language scale to measure the child's interaction, play, language comprehension, and language expression. Each child-parent pair in the experimental group was then seen six times, approximately 2 weeks apart at the university's child speech laboratory. Each session consisted of a 25-minute play period with the Laugh & Learn Learning Home playset (Fisher-Price).

RESULTS: The features of the toy influenced a variety of parent-child interactions.

The blocks, ball, mailbox, and door features related to more interactions than other features. Parent initiation and child response were the typical pattern, rather than child initiation and parent response. Parents dominated the communication. Child responses were significantly correlated with parent verbal initiations and actions. As children matured during the course of the study, they initiated more verbal exchanges with their mothers, and initiated more play activities. *'Child language and action increased over the sessions, which is typical for children this age as they discover the fun of games and recognise names of familiar objects'. Some of the toy features were particularly likely to be involved in child humour expression, and the strongest laughter occurred when parents used features of the toy to engage children in such social games as peek-a-boo. There were 625 total humour events across the six sessions (more than 100 per session!), with 52% of the events involving the ball, radio, door, or window.*

Whilst playing at home, the children showed the greatest interest in those items that are most familiar in the home - doorbells, clock hands, keys, windows, radios, doorknobs.

A year after the study was concluded, 34 of the parents, half of whom had children in the experimental group and half with children in the control group, were reached by telephone and asked to report on home activity with the Laugh & Learn Learning Home toy during the year following the study. Parents reported that the most frequently used features during the child's independent play were the door (23.7%), radio (15.8%), and mailbox (13.4%). When the child and parent played together with the toy, the door (18.8%), the mailbox (15.1%), and the shapes (12.1%) were most frequently used.

Parents were also asked if they thought learning occurred during the play, and most reported either that sensory motor learning (29%) or academic skill learning (28%) occurred.

Speech directed by mothers to their children primarily involved comments, questions, and directives to focus child attention on the toy features. Playing with the toy did not result in greater improvement in language skills when compared to those who did not play with this toy.

Bergen concludes, 'The toy appeared to be fun, mentally challenging, age appropriate, reliable, easy to understand and use, giving immediate feedback, and supporting physical and social interaction. However, it did not seem to promote imagination or extend play to higher levels, at least in the clinical setting. It may be that longer periods of play with the toy would show those qualities to be evident.'

Doris Bergen, Kathleen Hutchinson, Joan T. Nolan & Deborah Weber. 2010. Effects of infant-parent play with a technology-enhanced toy: Affordance-related actions and communicative interactions. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, vol. 24, 1-17.

Adult play may be more important than ever because it helps us adapt to change. And the world is changing at an increasingly rapid pace. Play helps to develop and hone those skills most necessary for successful adjustment to a changing world - language, communication, planning and strategy, abstract thinking, creative problem-solving, handling emotions, cooperation.

TOYS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL PLAY

There are a number of natural opportunities for children and adults to play, including public parks and recreation facilities, museums, toy libraries, and community initiatives. (Patton, 1998).

Physically active play is strongly associated with reduced obesity during childhood and a reduced risk of dementia late in life. People who exercise regularly in middle age are one-third less likely to get Alzheimer's disease in their 70s than those who do not exercise. Children, parents, and grandparents will all benefit from the healthy effects of games that involve movement, from playing hide-and-seek to playground activities and ball games of every sort.

Toys suitable for intergenerational play indoors are those that appeal to both children and adults, though perhaps for different reasons. Multi-functional toys, such as those studied by Bergen, contain many features that encourage child-parent communication, exploration, social game play, and humour expression. Careful analysis of toy features that lead to prolonged play, communication, and laughter may promote better toy play and toy design.

Any toy or game can be used by people of all ages. Just use your imagination to make up your own rules and games. Here are some suggestions of toys suitable for intergenerational play.

There are **board games** for every age and every ability. Man or woman, boy or girl, board games - especially those that use dice, spinners or cards - usually give a player, regardless of age or experience, a fair chance to win. This offers children a rare opportunity to experience equality with adults and older brothers and sisters. Board games help problem-solving skills in both children and adults and teach children to be patient and take turns. **Arts and crafts materials, puzzles and construction sets** encourage creativity and imagination. Many toys encourage **reading, writing, drawing and problem-solving**. **Dolls, puppets and soft toys** will promote fantasy, language and role-play. **Computer games and hi-tech toys** can enhance reaction time, memory and promote a sense of well-being among both children and elderly players. Indeed children may have the rare pleasure of teaching adults how to use these games. **Model toys, vehicles and trains** can promote physical skills and co-ordination. Toys with moving parts

teach how things work and fit together. For the elderly, they keep fine muscles working smoothly. **Musical toys** can always be enjoyed together. **Science kits** develop imagination, creativity, attention to detail and appreciation of nature.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERGENERATIONAL PLAY

Adults can learn to become play partners by trying to regain the playful attitude of a child. Let go of the adult notion that play is only for children. It is the fortunate adult who has never completely abandoned childish things.

- § Don't worry if you don't know how to use some toys. Let your imagination be your guide. Using toys in novel ways will help a child's creativity.
- § Let older children teach you how to use the latest toy or computer game. They will take great pleasure in teaching you what they know.
- § Play at the child's level. You can add to the complexity of the play, but let the child determine the direction of play.
- § Have fun! Don't use playtime to stretch your child's skills. They will develop anyway. Just have fun.
- § Encourage and congratulate children when a difficult task is completed. This will build self-confidence.
- § Do not solve every task for the child, but encourage her to solve the problem for herself. Doing something for a child is not playing.
- § Do not choose toys or games that are too complex for the child's capabilities. Something too difficult can be frustrating. And something too easy is no fun.
- § Safety is the first requirement of all play. Ensure that toys and games are suitable to the child's age and abilities. Read the safety information on the package.
- § Grandparents can have a few toys and games at home, ready for the grandchildren's visits.

'Perhaps the greatest test as we get older is to continue to seek out opportunities to do new things, to be playful, taking new risks to challenge our preconceptions (which may be pretty rigid)...Life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced.' -- Perry Else. (2009). *The Value of Play*. London: Continuum.