

A Closer Look at the Balance of Play

CHAPTER 20 The Balance of Play

Knowing how much movement matters in a child's development, the question now becomes how to put it into practice. And again, nature has the answer: play. For little ones, play is nature's movement motivator.

Play: Nature's Movement Motivator

Let's examine how play packs a move-to-learn punch by taking a closer look at our Balance of Play diagram.

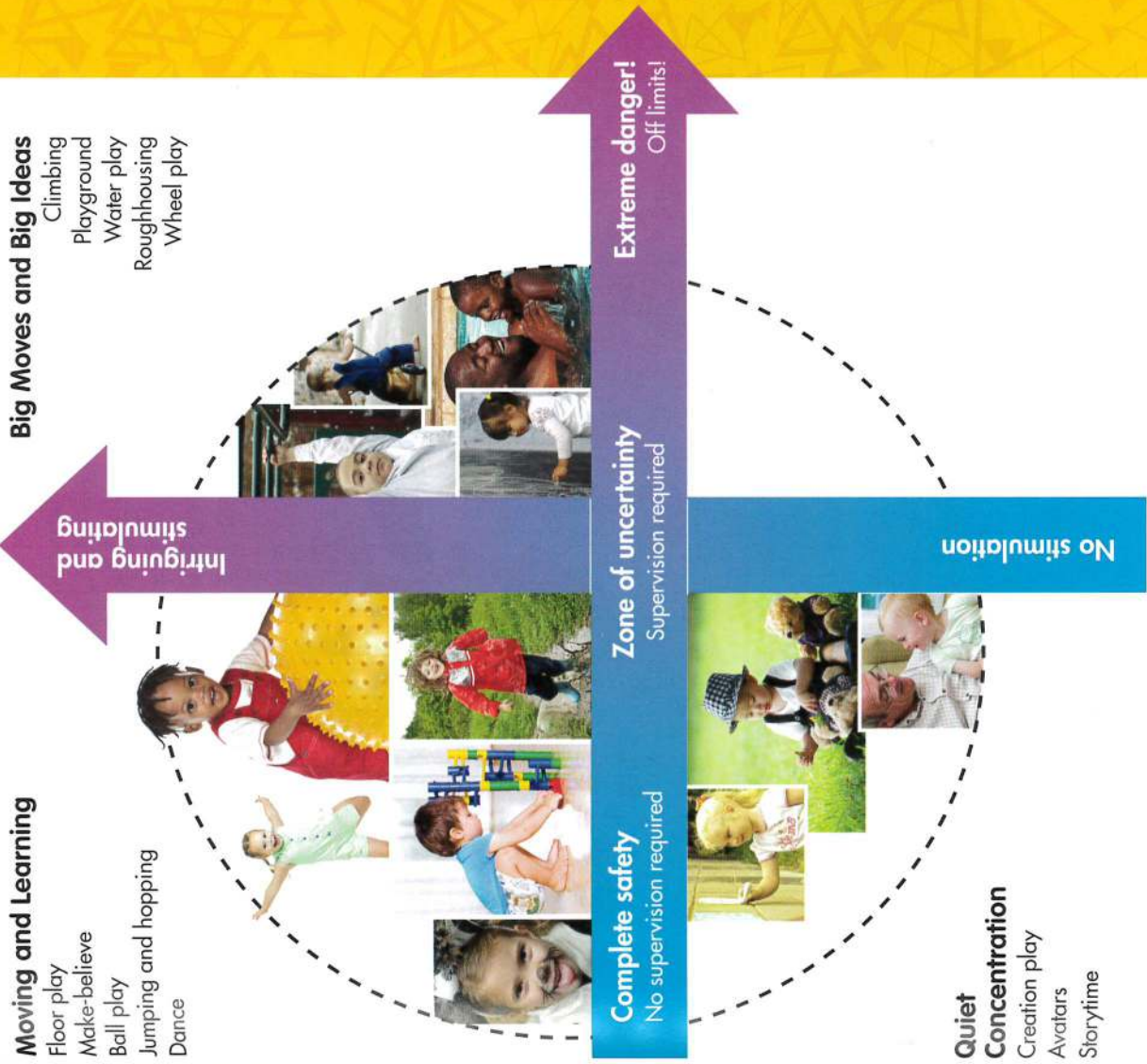
Moving and Learning

Moving and learning activities are the classic, indoor-outdoor active play patterns of everyday adventures. They offer kinesthetic, sensory, and whole-body experiences. And chances are, if children have adequate free play time, they're doing lots of this already!

Big Moves and Big Ideas

Big moves and big ideas are thrills that develop the confidence to try, try, and try some more, which leads to new concepts of what works and what doesn't for the child. The biggest moments in a child's day are those that challenge him to do things with his body he's never done before. Exciting and exhilarating conquests allow him to reach new heights, new speeds, and new sensations of space. This type of play includes playground play, water play, roughhousing, anything on wheels, and anything else that keeps little ones moving forward.

We recommend that about 80 percent of a young child's day be devoted to moving and learning and big moves and big ideas. The remaining 20 percent should be contemplative or artistic pursuits.



Quiet Concentration

Quiet concentration provides children with the downtime they need to digest all they've done and think things through. It includes a healthy amount of nothing-to-do time, when they can discover what their imagination is really made of. Quiet concentration activities include creating and making (arts, crafts, and construction), playing with avatars (dolls, action figures, vehicles, and animal figures), and storytelling.

As we take a closer look at the Balance of Play diagram (page 213), take particular note of the proportions it suggests, emphasizing *active* activity. In fact, we recommend that about 80 percent of a young child's day be devoted to high-energy, physical, sensory-stimulating types of play that fall under the categories of moving and learning and big moves and big ideas.

The remaining 20 percent should be contemplative or artistic pursuits.

In the next few chapters, we'll look at these types of play more closely, exploring why kids do what they do and what all that "doing" does for them.



Gill's Notebook

Count the Giggles

In today's achievement-obsessed world, kindergarten is the new first grade, preschool or preK is the new kindergarten, and who knows where toddlerhood is headed. More and more children are losing precious free playtime to well-intentioned "enrichment" classes and other structured experiences intended to provide children the best possible start in life.

Now, many adults claim remarkable learning results from these classes. And many say the structure provides other benefits, such as learning to follow directions, socializing with other children, or simply being exposed to new ideas. And that's all well and good, except for one thing: Play does all

Play comes from within. It doesn't need anyone else telling the child what to do or how to do it. It only needs the child.

Play is immediate. It meets a child's needs right here and right now, speeding up or slowing down on command. Play has no pickup time.

Play respects a child's choices because it knows his needs from the inside out. The rest of us are pretty much just guessing.

Play gives the imagination somewhere to go. Imagination is nature's way of helping a child interpret and experiment with life. It shapes his world vision and defines his point of view. At play, a child is in control of what's real and what's important.

Play is flow. At play, a child is free to set, change, and achieve his own goals without judgment. Self-satisfaction is his report card.

There's just one problem. The immeasurable benefits of play are not measurable. You can't take its temperature to see if it's working. It doesn't provide progress reports, and you can't compare it to the kid next door. And for some, that's just not good enough. So for those who need data points, here's what you can measure:

- Count the giggles. How many times a day does he laugh out loud?
- Count the quiet moments when he's so engrossed, he forgets to go to the bathroom.
- Count how many stories he tells about space aliens, pirates, princes and princesses, elves and fairies, robots, puppies and kitties, and a big hairy monster named Lou who hangs out in his closet.

Family Moves

Parents understand that kids love to play but sometimes don't see the contribution play makes to kids' development and learning. Print "Gill's Notebook: Count the Giggles" from the digital file and share it with parents to inspire families to see the value of unstructured play.



And when you've finished counting, consider this: Play produces children capable of pure joy, deep reasoning, and ideas nobody's ever thought of.

And by any measure, that's a start in life worthy of our children.

Chapter Summary

- **Moving and learning** activities are the classic, everyday indoor-outdoor active play patterns. They offer kinesthetic, sensory, and whole-body experiences.
- **Big moves and big ideas** are thrills that develop the confidence to try, try, and try some more. This type of play includes playground play, water play, roughhousing, and anything on wheels.
- **Quiet concentration** provides children with the downtime they need to digest all they've done and think things through. Quiet concentration activities include creating and making things; playing with dolls, action figures, vehicles, and animal figures; and storytime.
- **80-20 guideline:** About 80 percent of a young child's day should be devoted to the types of play that fall under the categories of moving and learning and big moves and big ideas. The remaining 20 percent should be quiet time.
- **Play motivates movement.** It is immediate, child-driven, and activates the imagination. It is essential and its value is immeasurable.



CHAPTER 21

Moving and Learning Play

The ancient Greek philosopher Sophocles said, "One learns by doing a thing; for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try." Moving and learning play is all about doing, and for little ones, it hardly matters what the "doing" is. As long as the child *chooses* it and is *physically* involved in it, fun and learning are bound to follow. This is the very basis of what is known as play-based learning.

Almost all play is a combination of moving and learning for young children. But here are a few key play patterns to note.

Role Play: Who Am I?

Why Kids Play This Way

When you watch a stick turn into a magic wand, a dish towel into a cape, a hairbrush into a microphone, or a table into a cave, you are witnessing the emergence of representational thinking and metaphor. Role play helps the brain transform "what is" to "what if" and open the gates to make-believe.

Moving Through Play

Through role play, a child uses the transformative power of storytelling. When a child borrows a character's physical characteristics—size,



strength, speed, bravery, agility, grace, silliness—it requires her to move her body in new ways. And she may surprise herself (and you) with abilities she didn't know she had.

For instance, a child might stop and think before jumping over a log. But Batman would never hesitate. With the awareness that “I can do what Batman does” comes the confidence and motivation to push herself even further.

Developmental Benefits

- Kids master new physical challenges by mirroring the actions of others. In addition to expanding her physical horizons, role play lets a child safely examine the edges of her emotional spectrum.
- In role play, strategic planning and creative problem solving are happening moment to moment, which helps develop children's independent decision making and the ability to think on their feet.
- When children role-play in a group, sophisticated social dynamics emerge, including responsibilities, teamwork, competition, victory, and defeat. And as the storytelling unfolds, language and communication skills evolve.
- Representational thinking sows the seeds for letter and number recognition and, eventually, reading and math.
- And of course, a child's imagination fuels every escapade, making role play one of the most personally satisfying kinds of play.

What You Can Do

Respect the realism. Just because it's make-believe doesn't mean it's not real. A child's imaginative journey into worlds she couldn't otherwise know is her natural way of learning and essential for her well-being.

Play your part sincerely. When a child invites you to role-play with her, accept your assignment and follow her lead. Stay in the moment and in character unless a safety issue crops up.

Let the child play her way. In role play, there's no room for logic or correction (unless safety is at stake). If you're unsure what the child is driving at, keep it to yourself. Try not to put ideas in her head. That can interrupt the flow and undermine her ability to come

Role play helps the brain transform “what is” to “what if” and open the gates to make-believe.

up with her own solutions. Instead, ask questions that help her describe her ideas so you can play along with the direction she sets.

Ball Play: Managing Unpredictability

Why Kids Play This Way

A rolling, bouncing, spinning, soaring ball is an apt metaphor for a child at play. A ball moves in much the same way a young child does—tirelessly rolling from one thing to another with just a simple nudge in any direction.

And just like a little kid, a ball reacts to that nudge in endlessly unpredictable ways. Which way will it roll this time? How far and fast will it go? How high will it bounce? Where will it go after that? And who's going to be there to catch it?

Moving Through Play

The objective of pretty much every ball game is to move the ball. How, where, and when you move it depends on the game you choose, but by and large, ball play is high-energy play. It involves whole-body movements like throwing, rolling, kicking, bouncing, and batting which all require sophisticated sensory and motor development.

Ball play helps a child learn how hard to throw, roll, or kick a ball to send it where she wants it to go. That requires body awareness and strength management. (See Chapter 9.)

In order to catch a ball, you have to be in the right

