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Learning is Child's Play

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To many parents, children's game playing seems to be just that—only playing and a waste of time. Yet, to preschool children, playing is the main way they come to understand and master their environment. Playing is a way of learning by trial and error to cope with the real world. It is a powerful means for learning. Parents know they are important to their children's development and that what they do with them affects their later learning but many are puzzled as to *what* they could or should be doing.

It's hard to play without toys. Children need toys to develop and learn. On the other hand, too many toys or poorly selected toys kill children's creativity in play. Just

as parents carefully select "tools" for their own work, they need to carefully select the child's "tools" for play—play is children's work.

As well as providing good quality toys give your child love, trust, and respect. Be a sensitive listener—this will help you detect what your child is thinking and feeling.

The series of guides that follow this introductory guide are designed to teach parents how to play with their children in order to expand the child's knowledge and self-concept. Another purpose is to help parents become more effective and satisfied in their roles. Each guide covers a specific game and explains the equipment needed, the purpose of the game, and contains specific

instructions for playing. These games can be constructed at home or they can be borrowed from the Parent-Child Interaction Project at your local University of Missouri Extension Center. (For specific information contact your area child and family development specialist).

If you choose to investigate the Parent-Child Interaction Project there are also video tapes available from University Extension centers that explain in detail how each game is played and also explain the parent's role in the game. However, detailed instructions are contained in the guides and if you are unable to get to a University Extension center, you should still be able to construct the games yourself and play them with your child.

When using these toys or playing any game with children, there are several guidelines that should be followed.

Guidelines for Play

- First, make sure you read the game's instructions carefully before starting to play with your child. If you understand the instructions your child will have an easier time understanding the rules.
- The physical setting is also important when playing with children. Parent and child should be on the same level. If you're comfortable, playing games on the floor might be the best solution. If children are dwarfed by a table or chairs when trying to play a game, they may feel defeated to begin with.
- Allow your child to examine the toy and play with it alone for a few minutes before beginning the actual game. This gives your child a chance to become acquainted with the toy's size, shape, color, etc. As a result, your child will feel more comfortable with the toy when the actual game begins.
- Always remember to ask the child only once to play the game. If your child is ready, fine—if not, then wait until another time and ask again. Avoid forcing your child to take part in any activity no matter how much you think

may be learned from it. There may be a good reason why a child doesn't want to play. Perhaps a child is worried about failing and can't face failure at this time.

As you are playing a game, your child may want to change the rules or devise a new game plan. If so you can play by your child's rules. This encourages creativity and a feeling of being worthwhile and important—someone who has ideas.

If children must play games the "right" way their ability to look at a variety of alternatives and to think of many ways to solve problems is limited. Children need preparation in order to develop into creative thinkers.

- Play a game only as long as your child is interested and not bored. If boredom or tiredness occurs, go on to another game, or stop playing entirely. Be sure to encourage your child to play, but don't let your encouragement grow into forcing or nagging. To be effective, the games must be fun for both of you.
- It's also important to remember how to react if your child gives a wrong answer in one of the games. Extremely negative reactions or put-downs may damage a child's self-concept and sense of well-being and should be avoided. Positive reinforcement is best. The way adults encourage or discourage a child may affect the child's future learning.

Summary

The games discussed in guides 6029-6037 are designed for preschoolers. Children will learn something new each time you play the game with them.

The skills that can be learned with these games are basic and are needed to expand children's knowledge of their everyday world and help them to function in a more mature way. They are skills that are necessary to succeed in school. By following these suggestions when playing with your child, you will be well on your way to helping your child learn important ideas through play.