

Active play

By Dinah Sloan, Public Health Nurse with Ottawa Public Health

Ask children why they play and the answer would probably be “because it’s fun.” Child experts would say that play is important business for children, and while fun is part of it, it is also an important way that children learn new skills.

There are different types of play – arts, crafts, reading, and make-believe, to name a few. Children need variety to help them develop skills and interests to the fullest.

There is a lot of evidence that our children are not engaging in enough of the active kinds of play that keep them in good health. Active play also helps children eat, sleep and behave better and is a healthy way to manage stress.

Here are some play and toy ideas to help get your children moving.

Outdoor play

The great outdoors offers boundless opportunities for active play. Most communities have parks, schoolyards and playgrounds with play equipment that allows children to climb, slide or just run around. An empty field to run in can offer a child a wonderful sense of freedom.

The City of Ottawa also has a great network of walking paths, and trails in conservation areas. If you’re taking a fairly short walk on a neighbourhood pathway, leave the stroller at home or have your toddler “help” you push it for part of your walk.

Trails near your home probably offer hills to climb and places to explore. Many communities also have outdoor pools (in summer) and outdoor rinks (in winter). Even very young children can learn to swim and skate.

If you have a yard, encourage your child to help you with tasks such as raking. A few jumps into a leaf pile can add another dimension of fun. On cold snowy days, bundle up and build a fort together, make snow angels, or shovel the walkway.

Indoor play

Sometimes the weather makes it impossible to stay outside long enough to play. You may need to summon your creative side to find active play ideas for indoors but your home is probably full of things that could be used to make up a game.

For example:

- Cardboard boxes, blankets, pillows, cushions, and furniture can be the building materials for an obstacle course or fort.
- An old mattress on the floor can be used to jump on.
- A broomstick and some imagination gives kids a “pony” to ride on.
- Empty plastic pop bottles or milk cartons can be safely used in a long hall as a “bowling alley.”
- Some lively music can get everyone dancing.
- A room can be cleared to make enough space to kick around a soft ball, play a game of tag or let kids make their own traffic with ride-on or push/pull toys.

Here are some toy ideas for indoor play:

- Blocks sponges or used plastic containers to stack and knock over.
- Push/pull toys.
- Toys for make-believe – building sets, child-sized broom etc.
- Blowing bubbles – and then catching them.
- Construction toys and big wooden or foam blocks.
- “Peg-in-the-hole” toys to hammer on.
- Soft balls to roll or pitch into a laundry basket.
- Music to dance to – toss and catch some scarves around for extra fun.
- Games that encourage movement, such as Twister.

Family play

Parents may be their child's favourite "toy"! Children feel special and loved when their parents take the time to play with them. Playing together is a great way to learn more about your children and build positive relationships with them. By having fun together, you are creating some of tomorrow's pleasant memories.

Active family play teaches children that it is important to make time to be active.

Here are some family play ideas to get you started:

- Take the time to toss around a ball or play a mirror-each-other game or the tried and true games of tag or hide-and-seek for older children.
- Play follow-the-leader with you as the leader. You can vary the walk so that you skip, hop, crawl, move sideways, walk on tiptoes, take big steps and little steps, crouch down, stand up, wriggle body parts, sit, stand, lie down, get up, go fast and then slow, reach up high and then down low, or roll on the floor. Once they have the idea, switch roles so that your child is the leader. Pretend you are going to the jungle and imitate the type of movement made by animals like elephants and snakes for example.
- Three-legged races or other games you remember from your childhood. Put a sheet of paper under each shoe and "skate" around the room!

For more information, call Ottawa Public Health Information at 613-580-6744, TTY: 613-580-9656 or visit www.ottawa.ca/health.

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