

THE RCNS PARENT DISPATCH

Parents supporting Parents: What we're reading, following and listening to...



Play is serious business. As we hope you discover from this digest, which is full of some of the greatest thinkers on the subject, play is not only the most natural way for young children to learn and grow, but it's also a profoundly effective parenting tool when it comes to **minimizing battles** and **maximizing connection**. While playing can be so simple and easy, the topic of play is actually fairly layered and complex:

Free or structured? How do I get my kids to play on their own? What if play becomes too aggressive? In fact, when putting this letter together, we (Leah and Milano) realized that play can be deeply personal, as it landed differently on each of us. We didn't want to compromise either of our stories by weaving them together for the sake of forming one *Letter from the Editors*, so we left them as is: separate but equally interesting and valuable to any parent thinking about play. Ellen's perspective too, on the benefits of aggressive play, adds yet another crucial layer of understanding. Without further ado, let's play.

Milano's Thoughts...

As a first-time mom living in a cramped NYC apartment, all I wanted to do with my baby boy, Buz, was **get out** of that apartment. And not just for simple neighborhood strolls. Between naps and mealtimes, we Uber-ed to countless classes: art, music, gymnastics, you name it. Once he was even part of a play group lead by a childhood development expert that showed us—parents and babies together—how household objects like salad spinners, Tupperware, and paper towel rolls doubled as awesome baby toys. Yep, we went to a class to learn how to play!

My intentions were good and pure. I was genuinely **excited** to expose Buz to all the neat things of childhood and what I thought his world **should** be—even doubling down on the stuff I wasn't exposed to in my own childhood. I would talk nonstop to him, naming everything in sight ("Look, that's a bird!"). I'd even escort him, strapped in the Baby Bjorn, to the neighborhood playground long before he had either

the interest or gross motor skills to actually **use** any of the equipment. It's as though I was trying to get him jazzed up for all that he had to look forward to. ("Look, this is a playground, Buz! This is what you're going to do soon.")

I think my sense of urgency to download Buz with so much information and experience stemmed from a panic that it was all on me: all the teaching, all the learning, all the playing. How would he know that a bird is called a bird, or that a fire truck is called a fire truck or the lyrics to "The Wheels on the Bus" if I didn't teach him?! As always, hindsight is 20/20. Eight years and three kids later (not to mention countless books read and workshops attended), here's what I know now that I wish I had known then: it's **not** all on me or you (if you're still reading). It's on **them**. And guess what: they'll do just great...if we parents get out of their way and let them.



It never occurred to me that play and learning are one in the same, and that Baby Buz would sponge up whatever he needed and wanted if I could just zip my lip and give him the space, time, and silence necessary. Plunking him down on a blanket in our living room with **just a few** soft blocks—or The Salad Spinner!—and letting him explore on his own, at his own speed, would have been more nourishing for his body and his brain than the three-ring circus I was producing for him every day. Dancing to music, just the two of us might have been more fun and bonding than following along to some dance teacher's program. Letting Buz listen to the **sounds** of birds, I now see, would have been so much more fascinating than knowing what the creature making those sounds is **called**. In fact, with my constant barrage of subtitles, I was actually interrupting and disrupting his natural education and development.

There's a twist though. While so much learning comes from play, play often **requires** learning. In other words, slowing down enough to sit down with your child on that mat and let your imaginations go somewhere **together** might not come so naturally to many parents or kids. It certainly didn't, and still doesn't, for me. In fact, it's one of my biggest insecurities as a parent: All the activities I was scheduling for Buz was half about my new-mom excitement, and half about the fact that I didn't really know how to engage in simple play myself. Not being a natural at, it is that much more difficult for me to weave play into my parenting and to use it as a tool for redirecting my kids from conflict, for instance, or for making mundane tasks like brushing teeth or getting dressed more fun and manageable...

Leah's Thoughts...

Do you ever get in a rut with morning or bedtime routines? Are your children resisting some learning activities like pre-reading or handwriting skills? Do you need to carve out some time during the day where your children entertain themselves – without squabbling with siblings? Do you desire a deeper connection with your children? **Play** can be a solution to all of these parenting challenges and needs.

Play, built into routines, can lighten up what can otherwise be mundane or challenging chores. For my 3-year old, tooth brushing involves hunting for “sugar bugs” that hide and make funny noises when we catch them – **Gotcha!**



Pretending to be a figurative character can help diminish a child’s fear of failure in learning new skills because it offers a degree of separation between the child and the perceived failure. When my daughter was learning to read, she would put on a super hero cape, armed with her super reader Popsicle stick. This was a **game changer** for lowering her frustration level – at herself – **and** toward me.

Play and laughter increase oxytocin and serotonin, which help deepen connections. This may not be intuitive, but a little bit of roughhousing can go a long way in soothing a child, strengthening bonds, and increasing confidence. Check out Ellen’s corner for more on this topic.

Play can also help kids overcome anxiety by allowing them to **act out** their emotions. When my daughter went in for her ear tube surgery, we role-played the procedure with her stuffed bunny the day before the real thing. This year, many of her stuffed animals and dolls have played out coronavirus-inspired scenes enduring “COVID tests” she administers, or having to wear a mask.

Playing didn’t come naturally to me as a new parent – and it still is a work in progress with several aha moments along the way. In our generation of over parenting and packed schedules, allowing simple unstructured play isn’t easy.

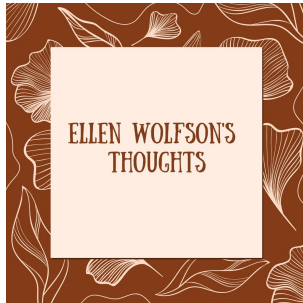
The good news is that play, especially free play, is making a comeback as observed in communities where movements for free play are under way. For example, when the [Swanson elementary school in Auckland, New Zealand](#) ditched their playground rules, they saw a decrease in bullying, serious injuries and an increase in classroom focus.

A little closer to home, in Wilton, Connecticut, parents, school staff, and local organizations have joined forces to form the [Free Play Matters Task Force](#) whose goal is to develop programs and spaces that foster child-directed free play. This task force has introduced the [Let Grow Project](#) at both elementary schools and have introduced new after-school free play clubs. The accomplishments of the Task Force are featured in the documentary [Chasing Childhood](#), which is definitely worth a look!

Are we ready to embrace a similar form of freedom of play and risk-taking? As a personal example, I let my son walk on the stone wall on the way to school occasionally. There is a part of me that is terrified he will fall, but when he gets to the other side the look on his face is sheer joy, accomplishment, and confidence –



like he has climbed his own Mt. Everest. And, I feel – for just a split second – the reassurance of why letting go a little can be a good thing.



Many parents I talk to express grave concern when their children, once content playing family or animal hospital, morph into fire shooting, sword fighting, karate chopping ninjas. Rest assured, this kind of aggressive play is not only normal, but it is actually beneficial in supporting and strengthening multiple developmental domains.

Children express a range of emotions through play; aggressive themes can symbolize feelings of empowerment, control, mastery of good over evil, to name a few. When adults can't accept this kind of play, they are communicating that these developmentally important feelings are not welcome. Of course, this in no way implies that you should allow your children to run wild throwing rocks at each other! There is a huge difference between play fighting, or rough and tumble play, and real fighting. And while you may think that aggressive play will inevitably end up with bruises or worse, a 2004 study found that play fighting escalates to real fighting **less than 1% of the time!**

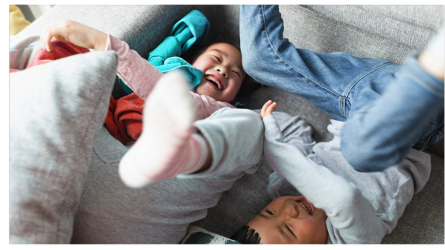
So how can you tell the difference? When children are really fighting, you can observe physical acts such as punching, kicking, hitting used to control another child or cause pain. You will notice rigid facial movements, clenched jaw, crying, and closed fists. Additionally, one child will tend to dominate the other, who is in the situation unwillingly.

During play fighting, children are typically smiling and laughing, and faces are relaxed. You will observe turn-taking which sustains the play; for example, switching good guy/bad guy roles, or red versus blue power rangers. Children may engage in aggressive gestures that do not involve hurting each other.



Rough and tumble play increases a child's capacity for physical and emotional regulation; it strengthens language development, specifically around understanding verbal and non-verbal cues and reciprocal conversation. Additionally, it strengthens social skills development through learning negotiation, conflict resolution, and turn-taking.

How parents can support rough and tumble play:



- Designate safe space both indoor and outdoor
- With child's input, develop and implement policies and rules (i.e., no grabbing around the neck, no hitting with fists or toys used as weapons, when a child says "stop" the game is finished, etc.)
- Supervise the play when appropriate: A young child's brain is still maturing and he/she may not yet have the capacity to regulate his body or emotions.



- [The National Institute for Play](#)
- [Let Grow Project](#)
- [Free Range Kids](#)



- [Raising Good Humans with Dr. Aliza: What to do with little ones when you can't go anywhere or buy anything](#)
- [Parenting with Play by Helena Mooney: Transform Challenges with Connection and Fun](#)
- [Playful Connection Podcast](#), Amy Cox, Playful Families
- [The Soothing Power of Deep Creative Play](#), Simplicity Parenting Podcast



- [Chasing Childhood](#), a feature documentary that explores the rapidly changing landscape of contemporary childhood and parenting
- [The decline of play | Peter Gray | TEDxNavesink](#)
- [What Kindergarten should be: Doris Fromberg at TEDxMiamiUniversity Instagram](#)



- [The Workspace for Children: All about independent play](#)
- Also See E-book: [The Workspace for Children: Your Guide to Quiet Time and Independent Play](#)
- [Meagan Rose Wilson](#)



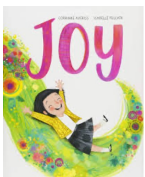
- [Recess without Rules](#) by Jessica Lahey – The Atlantic, January 28, 2014
- [Learning to Play with Your Kids](#), by Vicki Glembocki – Parenting, October 07, 2012
- [Let Your Kids Play: An Interview with Educator and Author Erika Christakis](#), by Rebecca Hill – Parent Map, April 22, 2016
- [How Play Energizes Your Kid's Brain](#), by Cassandra Willyard – NYTimes, July 21, 2020
- [When Playtime and Coronavirus Collide: Children are incorporating Covid-19 into pretend play](#), by Paul L. Underwood – NYTimes, Published July 21, 2020, Updated July 23, 2020
- [Risky Play Encourages Resilience: Lacking the usual scheduled activities and adult supervision, children are finding the space to play freely](#), by Christina Caron, July 21, 2020

- [Play Therapy Can Help Kids Speak the Unspeakable: Play is the language of children — which is why play therapy can help kids speak the unspeakable](#), by Dani McClain – NYTimes, July 21, 2020
- [A Paleontologist's Guide to Playing with Your Dinosaur-Obsessed Kid: Paleontologists say parents should nurture children's romance with playing with dinosaurs, for "Paleontology is the gateway to science."](#) By Nicholas St. Fleur – NY Times, Published July 21, 2020, Updated July 22, 2020
- [The Way We Used to Play: A mother compares her childhood freedom to her kids' playtime, filled with structured dates, piano lessons and tablet games](#), by By Lyz Lenz – NYTimes, July 21, 2020
- [No, My Toddler Doesn't Need to Learn to Code: Sales in educational toys are booming, but often there isn't much weight to their claims of teaching kids science and math](#), by Chavie Lieber – NYTimes, July 21, 2020



Picture Books that Encourage Imaginative Play and Inspire Kids to Play

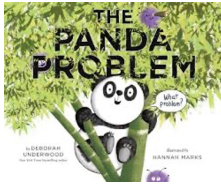
Check out these books along with [this article](#) on specific tips on how to invite imaginative play in your child after reading these books together. In addition, [this article by The Urban Child Institute](#) has 5 additional recommendations for picture books and games you can play with your little ones.



Joy by Corrinne Averiss; illustrated by Isabelle Follath

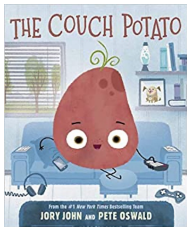


High Five by Adam Rubin; illustrated by Daniel Salmieri



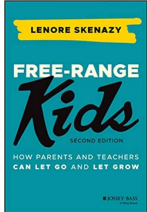
The Panda Problem by Deborah Underwood; illustrated by Hannah Marks

If your child needs some encouragement to break away from the screen and play outside, try this new book by Jory John.

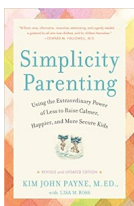


The Couch Potato by Jory John

Books for Adults



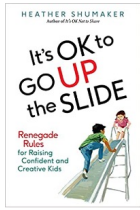
[Free-Range Kids: How Parents and Teachers Can Let Go and Let Grow](#) by Lenore Skenazy



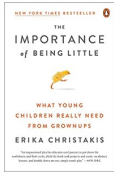
[Simplicity Parenting](#) by Kim John Payne



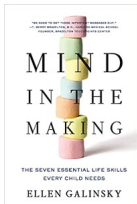
[Playful Parenting](#) by Larry Cohen



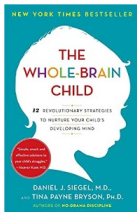
[*It's OK to Go up the Slide: Renegade Rules for Raising Confident and Creative Kids* by Heather Shumaker](#)



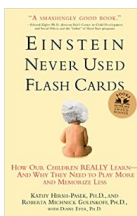
[*The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups* by Erika Christakis](#)



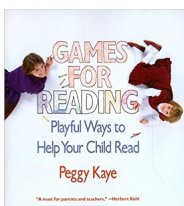
[*Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* by Ellen Galinsky](#)



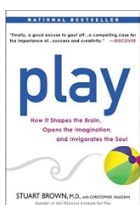
[*The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* by Daniel J. Siegel](#)



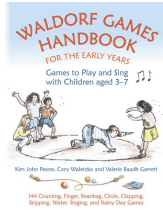
[*Einstein Never Used Flash Cards: How Our Children Really Learn--and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less* by Roberta Michnick Golinkoff](#)



[*Games for Reading: Playful Ways to Help Your Child to Read* by Peggy Kaye](#)



[*Play: How It Shapes the Brain Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul* by Stuart Brown](#)



[Waldorf Games Handbook for the Early Years: Games to Play and Sing with Children Aged 3-7](#)
(Waldorf Education)