



Play is *Powerful!*
**A Toolkit of Playful Games,
Activities & Resources**



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“Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development... As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges. Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue. ...when play is controlled by adults, children acquiesce to adult rules and concerns and lose some of the benefits play offers them, particularly in developing creativity, leadership, and group skills. In contrast to passive entertainment, play builds active, healthy bodies.”

– American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007

INTRODUCTION

Many adults have childhood memories of damming streams and building forts. We invented games and organized theatrical productions. We roamed the neighborhood or explored the woods until suppertime. Adults weren't a big part of our play. But childhood has changed. Societal worries about safety and academic achievement, hurried lifestyles, and the allure of high tech activities have reduced opportunities for children's play.

This erosion in children's unstructured free time is a serious loss. Pediatricians, psychologists and educators agree: self-directed play is essential for children's healthy social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

Play is a process not a product. Play is the doing, the building, the planning, the rule making and changing, even the arguing. It is not the fort – it is the making of the fort and the pretending in the fort and even the destruction of the fort.

Children need to play. Throughout history and all over the world, children have played. Play is the way kids can control their environment and their story. And, it's how they learn. But in today's adult-directed and media-saturated environment, some children have lost the knack of really playing. It's our job to help them get it back.

The purpose of this toolkit is to enable you to encourage and support children's free play without directing it; to help you help kids take control of their own play. In doing so, they exercise creativity and imagination, develop problem-solving skills, and learn to get along with others. They also have a lot more fun – and so can you!



Janice O'Donnell
Executive Director, Providence Children's Museum



Providence Children's Museum is a strong advocate for the critical importance of unstructured, child-directed play for kids' healthy growth and development, and for safeguarding their time, space and opportunities for play.

The Museum's mission is to inspire learning through active play and exploration. It defines play as freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, and involving active engagement.

Play is powerful!



TIPS FOR SUPPORTING AND ENCOURAGING PLAY

- **Observe.** Watch children’s play carefully, without making your presence felt. By observing their play, you will notice what they need from you (if anything). In England, where “playwork” is a recognized profession, playworkers talk about putting on a “cloak of invisibility.” You’re there and not there at the same time. You can step in if needed but you are not directing the play.
- **Trust that the children can solve their own problems and resolve their own conflicts.** They’re piling boxes on top of boxes and you can see the whole thing is going to topple. Let it topple. Maybe then you step in to offer them some masking tape saying, “This might help,” not “I’ll show you how to fix that.” Or some kids are arguing or play fighting. Wait and watch to see if they can work it out before stepping in.
- **As safe as necessary, not as safe as possible.** For the most part, children who do something that looks risky – climb to the top of the monkey bars, for example – can handle that risk safely. Kids who aren’t very adept climbers probably won’t climb that high. A running child may trip and skin her knee. You have Band-Aids and wipes to clean off the dirt. Banning climbing or running in the interest of safety is unnecessary and limits play value.
- **Eliminate real danger.** A certain degree of risk is fine and fun. Danger is not. If there are nails or broken glass on the playground, organize a crew to help clean it up. If the kids are creating houses and hide-aways out of big boxes, you keep hold of the box cutters. Have them draw where they want the door or window to be, but you do the cutting.
- **Create a rich environment for play.** That means open-ended materials and loose parts (see page 5). Watch to see how the children are playing and what materials could extend their play. Introduce new and different materials as needed.
- **Redirect unacceptable behavior.** If some kids are seriously interfering with others’ play or creating a dangerous situation, try giving them an alternative rather than just telling them to stop. You might introduce a game like those in this toolkit or bring out some new materials.
- **Take turns leading games.** Let the kids decide when to change the rules or how to even teams up or make the game more challenging. Ask a kid who is a bit contrary to be the referee. Be flexible and willing to shift gears.
- **Have fun!** Choose games and activities you can get enthusiastic about yourself. Your enthusiasm will be contagious. Let yourself enjoy children’s creative and quirky imaginations.

GREAT MATERIALS FOR PLAY

“In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.”

– Simon Nicholson’s Theory of Loose Parts

Loose parts are the simplest and least expensive and most malleable of objects – blocks, clay, sand and water, fabric scraps, pots and pans, shoeboxes, cardboard tubes, paper, tape and string. They don’t come with a story – kids create the stories. They don’t have an on and off switch – kids supply the action. There’s no wrong way to use them – kids make the rules. Playing with loose parts fosters creativity, resourcefulness, and problem solving. Because it’s self-directed and open-ended, it’s more likely to be sustained. It provides the best kind of learning.

Natural materials

- Water
- Sand, dirt or mud
- Stumps or logs
- Sticks or twigs
- Leaves, pinecones or acorns

Repurposed materials

- Cardboard boxes
- Toilet paper or paper towel tubes
- Newspaper
- Cups and containers
- Egg crates or berry baskets
- Fabric of all sizes, like sheets, towels, blankets and scraps

Others materials

- Sidewalk chalk
- Bubbles
- Hula hoops
- Jump ropes
- Balls
- Parachute
- Buckets and shovels
- Sponges
- String
- Tape
- Clothespins
- Music



PLAYFUL ACTIVITIES

Playscapes

- **Play Spaces:** Use cardboard boxes, newspapers, tubes, hoops and connectors like clothespins, clips, masking tape, rope or string to build a city, create a castle, construct a cave...whatever you want!
- **Fabric Forts:** Hang or drape sheets, towels or fabric scraps over tree branches – or over rope tied between trees or poles – to create fabric tents and enclosures. Try making a fort or a house with multiple rooms or areas.
- **Newspaper Tents:** Tightly roll sheets of newspaper and secure the ends and middle with masking tape to create newspaper rods. Connect the rods to build tall towers or different shaped structures. Try making a pyramid, a teepee or a tunnel you can fit inside. Drape or tape open newspaper sheets over cardboard boxes and the rods to form paper tents.
- **Obstacle Course:** Set up a crazy course with things to hop or climb over and tunnels to wriggle through. Use jump ropes, hoops, balls, boxes, fabric and more. How quickly can you travel through the course? Try adding new obstacles or challenges. Work together to design new courses.

Art Play

- **Chalk Art:** Take turns lying on the sidewalk or pavement and tracing one another's outlines. Then fill in your outline to create a self-portrait. Work together to create a chalk art mural of a city block, natural landscape or an imaginary place.
- **Shadow Art:** With a friend, take turns forming funny positions and different shapes with your bodies. Trace each other's shadows with a stick in the sand and decorate them with stones, twigs and other natural materials. (Also try this in sand, or with chalk on pavement.)
- **A-maze-ing!:** Create a maze with masking tape on the floor or chalk on pavement. Have a friend put on a blindfold and use words to guide him through the maze, telling him when and where to step or turn. Try it again with your friend walking backwards. How does it change your directions?
- **Weaving Wonders:** Create a woven masterpiece on a fence or playground climbing structure using a selection of natural and repurposed materials – bits of string, rope, ribbon, twine and fabric scraps.



PLAYFUL ACTIVITIES

Nature Play

- **Nature Art:** Take a walk through a park or around the neighborhood. Take paper and crayons and make rubbings of tree bark, buildings and other surfaces. Collect leaves and twigs for a nature collage or other art project.
- **Bug Out!:** Capture insects, worms, spiders and other cool creatures and use a magnifying glass to compare their parts. Find a field guide at the library and learn how to identify insects. Be sure to release the critters when you're done with your observation!
- **Fairy Houses:** Find a spot to build a miniature house for a hidden fairy, gnome or even a little mouse. Search for natural treasures to use for building, such as bark, twigs, tree stumps, acorns, leaves, pine needles, flowers, grass or stones. Include other found treasures, like bottle caps and bits of wood or plastic.
- **Rock On:** Gather rocks of different shapes, sizes and colors and stack them to create artful stone sculptures. Dip the rocks in water to see how their colors change when wet, and write or paint on the rocks.

Mud Play

- **Mud Pies:** Use kitchen tools like muffin tins, condiment containers and a garlic press to mold mucky "treats" and decorate them with found natural materials.
- **Mud Painting:** Use brushes, grasses or your fingers to make a marvelous mud-painted mural on the sidewalk or a big piece of fabric or paper.
- **Go With the Flow:** Dig mini-ditches and build piles of dirt or mud to make channels that move a stream of water. Notice how the water pools, flows and is absorbed as you make changes.
- **Mud Castles:** Everyone loves constructing sand castles with walls and moats – why not mud castles? Decorate your castle with natural objects like twigs, acorns and stones.



PLAYFUL ACTIVITIES

Water Play

- **Sidewalk Spray Art:** Ask a friend to lie down on the sidewalk or driveway. Using a spray bottle, squirt the ground around your friend's body with water until it is completely outlined, then check out the shape that's left behind! Try spraying other designs and patterns.
- **Water Painting:** Paint with water on a large rock or the sidewalk. Use natural materials as brushes.
- **Float a Boat:** Build boats out of tree bark, sticks and leaves and send them down a stream or across a puddle or pool. Try different materials to see what floats best and have boat races. Add sails and blow through straws to make wind.

Bubble Play

- **Basic Bubble Solution:** Mix one cup of Dawn® dishwashing liquid with a gallon of water. Let it sit open to the air overnight for stronger bubbles. (To make less solution, use 1/4 cup soap to 1 quart of water.)
- **Bubble Wands:** Gather ordinary household items and recycled materials with hoop shapes and built-in holes, like slotted spoons, plastic six-pack rings and plastic berry baskets, and use them to blow and launch bubbles. Make your own bubble wands by bending pipe cleaners into different shapes.
- **GIANT Bubbles:** Thread a piece of string through two drinking straws and tie the ends in a knot. Hold the bubble maker by the straws, outstretched, and dip it into a pan of bubble solution. Gently lift the bubble maker out of the pan and steadily pull it upward to make a BIG bubble. It can be tricky to do – keep practicing! Try to release the bubble by closing the straws or twisting your frame.



GREAT GROUP GAMES

Sound Ball

Everyone stands in a circle and passes an invisible ball around. The only way the ball can be passed, however, is if a person attaches a sound and dramatic action to it. The receiver of the ball must replicate the sound and action in order to “catch” the ball. The receiver now becomes passer and makes up a new sound and action to pass the ball to someone else.

This Isn't a Stick

Players sit in a circle and one person starts by holding a stick (or another common object), saying, “This isn't a stick. This is a ____.” It could be anything – a mustache, a horn, a sword. The player does a motion with the stick, then passes it to the next player. Each player can simply come up with a new identity for the stick, or you can make it more of a challenge by having each player first repeat all of the other stick identities/motions before sharing his/her own until the last person has to repeat them all.

Where's the Rock?

The group sits in a circle and one person is asked to leave the area. Then, a rock (or other small object) is placed in someone's hands. Each person continually acts like they are passing an object around the circle, and it is up to the person who has left to come back in and try to find who has the rock after a few seconds of passing. There are many songs that can go along with this game.

Make a Thunderstorm

Everyone stands in a circle. Someone begins the storm by rubbing her hands together, then the next person does, too. Once that person starts, the next person starts, and so on. Once it gets around the circle to the origin of the storm, the storm starter starts snapping and the chain begins again. Then hitting thighs, stomping feet, or other sounds. Go back down that pattern to calm the storm down.

Spy Hunter

Have everyone stand in a circle and silently choose someone in the group to be their “enemy.” Next they silently choose someone in the group to be their “bodyguard.” When the facilitator says “Go!,” the object is to be “safe.” The only way you can be safe is if your bodyguard is between you and your enemy. Remember that neither your bodyguard nor your enemy knows that they play that role for you, and in fact, they have their own bodyguard and enemy.



GREAT GROUP GAMES

Cross the Great Divide

Divide the players into pairs. Standing side by side, each player places one of his feet tightly against his partner's foot. The goal is to walk across the room without letting their feet lose contact. Then try it with teams of three, four, five and upward until the whole group is walking together in one long line.

ESP Combos

Divide the group into three teams and arrange in a triangle so that they can all see each other. Give the teams two minutes to come up with a movement and a sound effect combo to represent their group (no words, only sounds). The teams take turns to show and teach their movement/sound combo to the other teams. Once the whole group knows the three different sound/movement combos the challenge starts. Each team secretly chooses one of the three movement/sound combos to do. On the count of three all the teams do the combo. Repeat until all the groups make the same choice.

Lava Flow

Scatter hula hoops around in a large open space. Everyone playing has found out that the floor has become covered in lava, but only when the facilitator calls out "lava flow." In the meantime, the players are supposed to wander around the room. When "lava flow, 3-2-1" is called, the players need to find shelter inside a hula hoop before the countdown ends. As time goes on, the facilitator removes hula hoops and the game gets more and more difficult as there are more people per hoop. Feet must touch the ground inside the hoops to be safe and everyone must be safe in order for anyone to win.

Group by Number

Players wander around the playing space. When a number is called, everyone moves to make small teams containing that number of people. The goal is to group together as quickly as possible! The leader asks the teams to say hello, wave or shake hands. The teams are then instructed to say goodbye to their members and break apart. Players begin walking again until a new number is called.

Follow the Leader – as Animals!

Choose a leader, who can hop like a frog, crawl like a crab or slither like a snake. Have everyone else follow the leader and try to figure out what kind of animal they have become. Then switch leaders.

GREAT GROUP GAMES

Marble Chute Challenge

Players work together to move a marble across the playing area without letting it drop in this fun relay. Choose a starting and finish point and give each player one chute (a paper towel tube, cut in half or whole). The marble must touch every player's chute. No one is allowed to touch the marble or any other player's chute, or to walk with the marble. The marble cannot stop, move backwards on the path, or touch the ground. If the marble drops, players have to start over! How many tries does it take to get from start to finish? To extend the game, have players race the clock, or form teams to race against one another.

Crazy Challenge Races

Have playful competitions where the object is to complete a challenge in the shortest time possible. For example, run to the other side of the room or yard, put on all the clothes in a box and run back. Make challenges more difficult by running backward or hopping on one leg.

Balloon Badminton or Volleyball

Play balloon volleyball (with or without a net) or make rackets using paper plates and rulers for a game of balloon badminton. Try each game outside or in a roomy indoor space. See how long you can keep the balloon bouncing before it hits the ground!

Tag Games

- **Blob Tag:** In this variation of tag, the players who are caught join hands with the player who is "it" to form a blob. As more people are caught, the blob becomes larger. (Tip: limit the playing area so that the blob does not have to chase people too far!)
- **Zombie Tag:** Define a playing area that isn't too large. "It" is a zombie and needs to move with his arms straight out in front of him and walk with stiff legs – like a zombie. Everyone else starts out as a human. Zombies and humans walk – no running. When the zombie tags someone, that person also turns into a zombie and tries to tag humans. Everyone tagged turns into a zombie – and stays a zombie – until there are no humans left!
- **Tail Tag:** About half of the players have tails – a piece of fabric stuck into the back of their belts or back pocket and dangling out. The other players chase the tails and try to grab the fabric. If a player gets a tail, she sticks it in her belt and runs away from the non-tails, so everyone keeps switching sides.



PLAY AND ACTIVITY RESOURCES

Providence Children's Museum play specialists recommend the following resources for more great game and activity ideas.

Books of Activities

Steven Caney's Ultimate Building Book: Including More Than 100 Incredible Projects Kids Can Make! by Steven Caney and Lauren House
A fascinating exploration of structures and design with ideas for contraptions and playthings that children can make themselves

I Saw A Purple Cow: And 100 Other Recipes for Learning by Ann Cole, Carolyn Buhai Haas, Faith Bushnell and Betty Weinberger
A classic handbook of songs, games, projects and fun activities for young children

Unplugged Play: No Batteries. No Plugs. Pure Fun. by Bobbi Conner
Tips and hundreds of engaging play ideas for children at different developmental stages, indoor and outdoor play experiences, parent and child play, crafts and games

How to Be an Explorer of the World: Portable Life Museum by Keri Smith
A series of 59 interactive explorations that prompt readers to explore and discover the world as artists and scientists

I Love Dirt: 52 Activities to Help You and Your Kids Discover the Wonders of Nature by Jennifer Ward
Open-ended outdoor activities that promote exploration, stimulate imagination, and inspire a sense of wonder

Making Things: The Handbook of Creative Discovery by Ann Sayre Wiseman
An inspiring compilation of creative crafts and projects

Books of Games

The Outrageous Outdoor Games Book by Bob Gregson

Elementary Teacher's Handbook of Indoor and Outdoor Games by Art Kamiya

Win-Win Games for All Ages: Co-operative Activities for Building Social Skills by Sambhava Luvmoor and Josette Luvmoor

Youth Leadership in Action: A Guide to Cooperative Games and Group Activities by Project Adventure

Play It! by Wayne Rice and Mike Yaconelli

Quicksilver: Adventure Games, Initiative Problems, Trust Activities and a Guide to Effective Leadership by Karl Rohnke and Steve Butler

Everybody Wins: 393 Non-Competitive Games for Young Children by Jeffery Sobel

Playfair; Everybody's Guide to Noncompetitive Play by Matt Weinstein and Joel Goodman



PLAY AND ACTIVITY RESOURCES

Websites for Activities

Active Kids Club • www.activekidsclub.com

Fun and simple ideas for ways to get out and play

Earthplay • www.earthplay.net

Resources for creating beautiful and engaging outdoor environments for children

Kid Activities: 1000's of Ideas for Childcare Professionals and Teachers • www.kidactivities.net

Art, crafts, games and tips for engaging school-age kids

Let the Children Play: Progressive Preschool Education • www.progressiveearlychildhoodeducation.blogspot.com

Hundreds of creative ideas for outdoor play and learning from a progressive play-based preschool

Unplug Your Kids • www.unplugyourkids.com

Activities, crafts and books for classroom, homeschool or simple screen-free fun

Wild Zones • www.wild-zone.net

About creating open-ended outdoor play spaces

Groups and Organizations that Support Play

Alliance for Childhood • www.allianceforchildhood.org

Promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning and joy of living; links to articles and research on website

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) • www.aap.org

Issued an important report in 2007, "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds"

Free Play Network • www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk

Committed to better opportunities for children's free play - at school, in public spaces and in their communities

KaBOOM! • www.kaboom.org

A national non-profit dedicated to saving play for America's children; creates community playspaces and provides online trainings, research and resources

PlayWatch: Connecting the Community to Promote Children's Play • www.playwatch.org

An email discussion listserv hosted by Providence Children's Museum to share information, articles, resources, events and more - including ideas about what we, as a community, can do to safeguard children's play

Re-Thinking Childhood • www.rethinkingchildhood.com

About the changing nature of childhood