Play vital for child growth

Physical activity raises a child’s self-esteem and sense of accomplishment

A group of children sat busily playing in a sand pit. I was amazed to see the amount of vocabulary that was used as each child used his/her own experience and exposure to make sense of the play.

At school, I find the sand pit the best play area! As children play, they bring in their various experiences into it. While children pretend to bake cakes, or cook a meal, they are talking constantly to each other. “Please pass the butter”, “I need four more eggs”, “I’m cooking rice and chicken…” are some of the things I hear being discussed in the sand pit.

In their role play, the children totally take up the roles of mums and dads and try to make it as real as possible. Should we really deprive children of this magical play? I love watching children play. In my work, I have watched hundreds of children learn new skills and enjoy the pure act of physical play.

Play is nature’s way of getting children to do work of growing up. Many teachers and researchers are now turning their attention to free play.

Free play is the kind that does not involve guidance from teachers and parents or anything with screens and batteries…?

Benefits of play

It builds confidence and imagination. Through physical activity, children are given the chance to try new things, conquer their fears and build their confidence.

Research has shown that when a child is physically active and successful in their movements, they show higher levels of self-esteem and a great sense of accomplishment.

Every new attempt ends in reward…whether it is trying to somersault for the first time, or climb a tree. Once the child has accomplished it, his confidence raises and he is able to take on bigger and more challenging activities.

More so, play develops key motor and athletic skills. Children will develop and grow without even realising it. When they play with a ball, they are learning about hand-eye, hand-leg coordination, balance and spatial relationships.

When they play with toys, ropes, blocks, they strengthen their fine-motor skills. When they dance, they are learning about rhythm and beat.

Hence, being fit enables children to experiment with other aspects of their growth. As children play and become fit, they are more likely to participate in sports, games and other physical activities that improve muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, cardio-respiratory endurance and body posture.

Play teaches teamwork and good sportsmanship. Playing with friends in sand, with water and with toys, helps children interact positively. Here, it does not matter if they win or lose. What is vital is that children learn to play together.

In team sports such as soccer, for example, children build each other’s strength and success and cheer each other on. This is a valuable lesson of team work done innocently through play.

It is important to note that playing builds strong bonds between parents and children. When parents are actively involved in their children’s play activities, a bond is created. These are childhood memories that children will look back at fondly.

As parents, you are the biggest supporters of your children’s learning. You can ensure they have enough time to play to promote cognitive, language, physical, social and emotional development.

Play, in other words, is the most important aspect of our children’s growth. As teachers and parents, we must create time for them to play and encourage them to have physical, outdoor or creative play whenever they can.

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