



Playing Is Learning

PLAY UNIT

This unit is about learning. It is about how babies learn and how parents can help or hinder this process. The unit focuses on the power of play to promote learning. Playing is engaging in an activity for interest and pleasure.

Play is a natural corridor for learning in the first three years. Throughout nature the young are playful. For most mammals, playful activities involve practice in social and survival skills. Human babies also are learning through play to survive within their group. They are driven to master developmental milestones and to copy and please the adults in their world. When learning is shared through play experiences, learning becomes paired with pleasure. Rules are accepted; there is pride in mastery and joy in sharing.

Shared positive emotions provide emotional stability and resilience. Parents who use positive emotions to regulate and educate their babies are teaching their children to show love and respect and to use adults as resources. These babies demonstrate a positive identity and usually expect to participate in social interactions. They are less fussy and oppositional. They focus well and usually have good sleeping habits. We also know that children do better in school if their parents have used “interest” words and “teaching” statements to shape their first few years.

Positive and negative emotions are processed by different neurological pathways. As in all early development, these pathways are strengthened with practice. As the pathways are strengthened, they become firmly established as patterns of relationship that can last for a lifetime. By learning to interact with more positive emotions than negative, parents will set patterns that will shape the identity and self-esteem of their baby.

Relationship patterns set in the first three years are predictive of a child’s future success. Relationships in the first year are usually about safety, trust, and love. In the second year, relationships include rules, limitations, and confrontation. There is a marked spurt in babies’ initiative toward the end of the first year. Babies are exploring more spaces and things, but they are also exploring relationships. “What happens when I fuss, break a rule, or run away?” At this time babies’ emotions are uncontrolled; they cannot seem to regain balance. They are learning and changing in almost every mode of development at the same time. No day is the same.

How parents manage this spurt in initiative and the emotional extremes that

occur throughout the second year will significantly influence the enduring pattern of their relationship with their baby. Also, this relationship pattern will set the guidelines for how babies will fit in with other family and childcare providers. This period is when babies learn tactics for surviving and sharing while still satisfying their own needs and wants. This is when babies learn to negotiate their drive for mastery with their drive to belong. “How do I gain independence and still stay close to my safe base?” It is parents who define this balance.

Play is a way to move smoothly and lovingly into the rules of prosocial behavior. Play teaches cooperation, collaboration, turn taking, and rules. Play involves helping and sharing. Specific patterns or routines are used to achieve goals. Learning and mastery are inherent in play. Initiative can be expressed, yet channeled. Best of all, intimacy or a feeling of acceptance is fulfilled.

Toddlers need special understanding and special parenting tactics. They are demanding independence, testing their own power, experiencing extremes of excitement, anger, and fear. At the same time, they are needing protection, seeking comfort, or collapsing with exhaustion. They are searching for models to help them understand how to behave and how to gain control of themselves. Toddlers need the closeness of a safe emotional base for balance.

The period from 1 to 3 years of age is notably difficult for all parents. Toddlers need some kind of regulation and guidance every 5 to 10 minutes during their waking day. For high-risk parents, this demanding period often turns into an angry battleground. Abuse or rejection during this period is not uncommon. Play and shared positive emotions are excellent tactics to teach parents.

Adolescent and high-risk parents play less with their babies. Some are embarrassed; others feel that playing is indulgent or wasteful effort. Some have been teased or assaulted during experiences that were initiated as play. Many have had little experience with play. They do not know how to play with an infant. They do not know what skills a baby is capable of learning. They do not know how to judge a baby’s abilities or offer age-appropriate interactions. Expectations are set too high. There is little patience with the repetition and experimentation a baby uses to master skills.

Teaching parents how to play and how to teach through play will give them a skillful and enjoyable approach to managing the infant and toddler years. By increasing parents’ understanding of how babies learn, how they develop, what their emotional, physical, and social needs are, and how their behavior can be regulated without anger, we help parents to establish positive relationship patterns with their babies. This leads to stable and resilient children.