

Tip Sheets

Characteristics of Play

So, what is play?

While there are many definitions for the word, play is perhaps best defined by looking at some of its specific characteristics. Many researchers have shared their theories of these characteristics. In 2009, Dr. Peter Gray examined the attempts to determine the characteristics of play. The result was a list of the five most agreed-upon characteristics of play.

Play is...

1. Self-chosen and self-directed.
2. Intrinsically motivated. The means (processes) are more valued than the ends (results).
3. Guided by mental rules, but with room for creativity.
4. Imaginative.
5. An active and alert state of mind, but is relatively non-stressed.

Play is self-chosen and self-directed.

The child is the director of his play and he decides how and when they will play. Children are naturally inspired to use play to explore, problem-solve, and simply enjoy the world and people around them.

Play is intrinsically motivated. The means are more valued than the ends.

Children are naturally motivated to play. A child may sometimes have a goal for their play, but more

often than not, a child will play for the sheer joy of playing.

Children are primarily interested in the process of play and not what they will gain from the play experience. This enables them to freely experiment with possibilities, think flexibly, and solve problems.

Play is guided by mental rules, but with room for creativity.

There is structure and rules of play that exist in the mind of the child. These rules provide boundaries that help a child determine their actions. For example, if a child is building with blocks, the basic rule is that they will use the blocks to create a representation of something in their mind. Should they have a new idea, the child has the freedom to be creative and change what they had in mind when he began to play.

This can also be observed when children engage in role playing. There is a shared understanding of each child's role and it is expected that each child will stay in their role within the play interaction. Any changes in roles will need to be negotiated. This negotiation encourages the development of communication and social interaction skills.

Play is imaginative.

All play involved creativity, invention, and vision. Children create and develop the characters, stories, and action of their play, which are then governed by the rules in their minds rather than the rules of their everyday lives.



Children will use everyday items as symbols or representations of other things, i.e. a block can be used to represent a phone. This process is believed to contribute to the development of reasoning and understanding of abstract symbols.

Play is an active and alert state of mind, but is relatively non-stressed.

Children think actively about what they are doing in play and remain alert to the rules of their play. They are not easily distracted. The child's mind becomes immersed in play and they may lose track of time and what is happening around them.

Research has shown that this state of mind is the perfect stage for creativity and learning new skills. Because play is self-chosen, it is generally not stressful. Should it become stressful, children have the option to stop or make changes to their play.

Additional Resources

Healthychildren.org | The Power of Play - How Fun and Games Help Children Thrive
<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/fitness/Pages/Caution-Children-at-Play.aspx>

Minnesota Children's Museum | The Power of Play
<http://www.childrensmuseums.org/images/MCMResearchSummary.pdf>

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