



# The Story of Play





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## It's not all fun and games...

At the end of the 1800s, children were living in squalor in the industrialized cities of America. Poor health, crime, and juvenile delinquency were prevalent, and places to play were woefully missing. A movement was started to improve the lives of urban children, and creating places to play was a significant part of that effort.

Now, over 100 years later, there is a new movement to again improve children's lives and rescue them from their environment. This time it is obesity, isolation, and the complexities of modern lifestyles that threaten children's lives, but play is once again seen as an important antidote.

In the latter part of the 20th century, play began to disappear from children's lives. Concerns about the safety of children and risks of abduction, traffic accidents, and injury or abuse prompted parents to stop allowing children to leave the house on their own, let alone play unsupervised. And today only one in five children live within walking distance (a half-mile) of a park or playground, according to a 2010 report by the federal Centers for Disease Control, making children even less inclined to play outdoors.

The busy lives of two-income families leave little time for parents to take their children to a playground or other place to play. As a result, the presence of traditional, free outdoor play has rapidly declined in the United States. It is being replaced with cyber-play and organized sports. Children spend ever-larger portions of their time in front of televisions and computers and relatively little time outdoors.

Over the past three decades, the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children ages 2-5 years and adolescents ages 12-19 years, and it has more than tripled for children ages 6-11 years. At present, approximately nine million children over 6 years of age are considered obese. The prevalence is even greater among low-income preschoolers, with nearly a third of low-income children ages 2-5 being obese or overweight. Nationally, one out of every seven low-income, preschool-age children is obese.

## Severe Health Consequences

Being overweight or obese puts children at the risk of many serious health problems, now and throughout their lives. Cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression are typical threats. Preschoolers who are overweight/obese face an increased risk of obesity and its related health risks in young adulthood. Obese children and adolescents have a greater risk of social and psychological problems, such as discrimination and poor self-esteem, which can continue into adulthood.

***In Alexandria, the obesity epidemic is particularly disturbing. A 2007 study on obesity in Northern Virginia found that 43.5 percent of Alexandria's children between the ages of 2-5 were overweight or obese!***



Now, according to a 2007 Stanford University study, inactivity among children may result in this generation being the first in American history to have a shorter life span than their parents. Physical education, recess at school, and outdoor play at home are essential to healthy child development.

## Play and Developmental Benefits

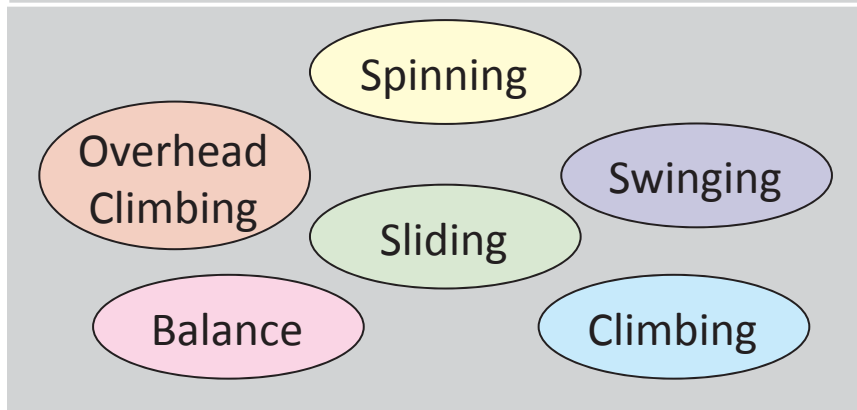
We are born to move. It's one of the first things a child discovers and learns to do. It's not just a human trait but is found in many species. It has a purpose.

Quality movement experiences are an essential part of a child's development and are just as important for newborns as for older children. Moving and physical activity assist with the healthy growth of a child's brain and body—and have an impact on a child's social, emotional, physiological, cognitive, and physical abilities and behavior.

For small children, playing is learning. Play has proven to be a critical element in a child's future success. Play helps kids develop muscle strength and coordination, language, cognitive thinking, reasoning, and social abilities.

Play also teaches children how to interact and cooperate with others, laying foundations for social skills that are carried into adulthood. The problem solving that occurs in play may promote executive functioning—a higher-level skill that integrates attention and other cognitive functions such as planning, organizing, sequencing, and decision making. Executive functioning is required not only for later academic success but also for success in those tasks of daily living that all children must master to gain full independence, such as managing their belongings and traveling to unfamiliar places.

## 6 Essential Elements in Playground Designs





Play encourages autonomous thinking, provides opportunities to practice new skills and functions, promotes flexibility in problem solving, and develops creative and aesthetic appreciation—all in a context of minimum risks and penalties for mistakes.

## The Importance of Being Outdoors

Children's declining access to nature, and the resulting impacts on their development and well-being, point to a critical need to restore nature to the fabric of children's everyday lives. Research has discovered that physical and mental health benefits occur when young children are connected to nature.

Playing in environments that incorporate natural elements is important because nature is essential to both children's and adults' psychological and social health. It has been found to have an apparent beneficial effect on blood pressure, heart rate, mood, day-to-day effectiveness, social behavior, cognitive functioning, and work performance.

Research conducted at child care centers in Sweden where children were outdoors in all weather conditions found that children were sick less of the time, motor development was more advanced, power of concentration was heightened, and play activities were more diverse, especially in the affective, imaginative, and social domains.

An added benefit of connecting children to nature is that it instills an affinity and appreciation of the value of nature and builds future stewards, so that the children of today's kids will have the opportunity to enjoy valuable connections to nature.

## So what is the importance of play?

**PLAY** promotes:

- cognitive, social, and language development
- physical fitness and health
- learning and coping skills
- general health and well-being
- creativity
- working in groups
- dealing with challenge
- exploration
- engaging in childhood passion, imagination, and brain development





## The Need for Playspaces

Play has the potential to improve all aspects of children’s well-being: physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. Lack of access to appropriate places to play is therefore a serious concern.

Preschool children seem to have highest physical activity levels while engaged in play outdoors. The outdoors is where free play and gross motor activity in young children are most likely to occur. For this reason, a primary focus is placed in this study on the availability and quality of suitable outdoor playspaces for children between the ages of 2-5.

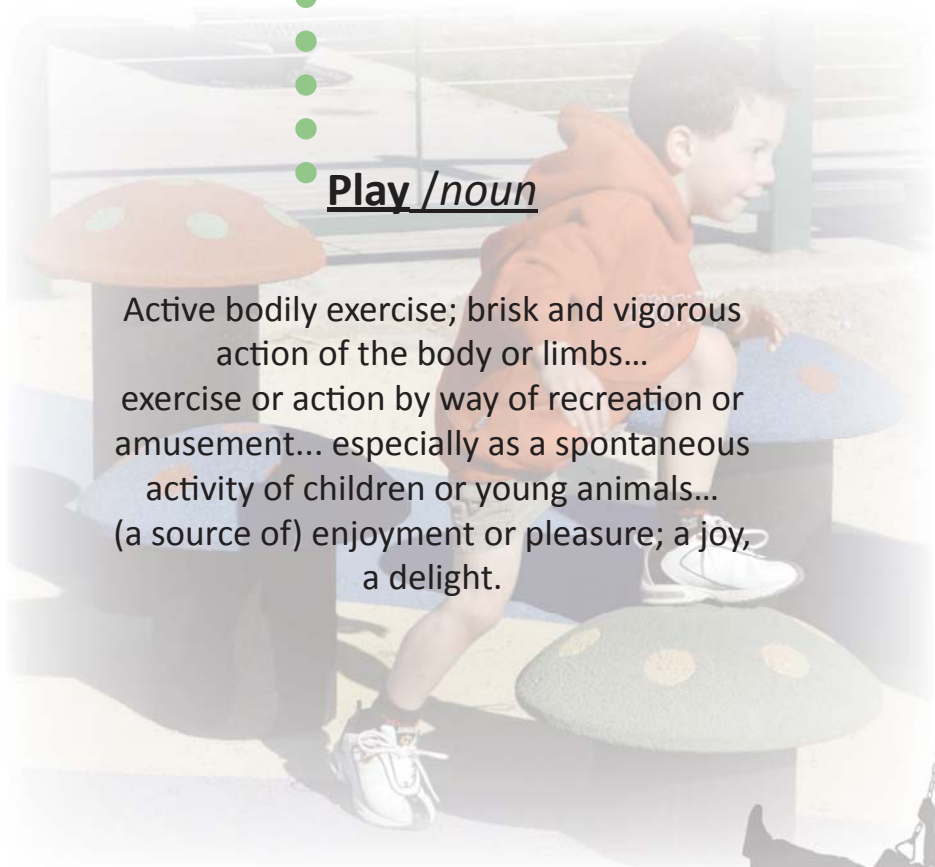
## What Is Play?

To understand play in Alexandria, we need to define what we mean by **PLAY**. The word has a wide range of meanings and can be used as either a noun or verb. The Oxford English Dictionary devotes more than a page and a half to defining play. For the purposes of this study, some useful definitions include:



### Play /noun

Active bodily exercise; brisk and vigorous action of the body or limbs...  
exercise or action by way of recreation or amusement... especially as a spontaneous activity of children or young animals...  
(a source of) enjoyment or pleasure; a joy, a delight.





## Our Definition of Play

For our purposes, let us consider play as used in this report to refer to the:

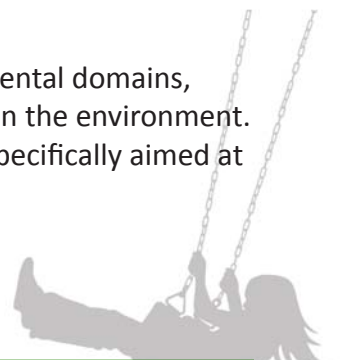
*Free  
and spontaneous  
activity of children  
associated with motion of  
the body and action of the mind  
for the purposes of pleasure,  
delight, growth, health, and  
development.*



## Components of Play

Researchers agree that when evaluating children’s environments the best approach is to look at the environment’s ability to support the development of the whole child. Physically active play is the direct link to healthy growth, but play has the innate potential to improve all aspects of children’s well-being: physical, emotional, social, and cognitive. It is important for each of these “domains” to be addressed in the places where children play. This requires a play environment with a good mix of activities and features that support children’s intellectual, social, and physical development, as well as exposure to nature. These components provide a great platform for enhancing children’s health and learning, along with their connectedness to nature and to other children and adults.

Individual play activities on a playground can support one or more developmental domains, depending on the quality of the play structure or the natural features found in the environment. For the purposes of this study, a focus was placed on the play environment specifically aimed at





2-5-year-olds. An environment for 2-5-year-olds has to be able to accommodate both toddlers and sophisticated older preschoolers. Five critical components of play for 2-5-year-olds were defined and evaluated at each individual playspace in Alexandria. The five components are as follows:

### ***Physical Domain***

The playspace should offer opportunities for physical activity appropriate for young children. Active physical play has a positive effect on children's physical development and coordination and helps prevent obesity. Examples include climbing, crawling, walking, running, sliding, climbing through, throwing, skipping, hopping, jumping on/off, lifting, and balancing. Vestibular stimulation that trains the sense of balance is experienced in activities like rolling, swinging, rocking, sliding, twisting, turning, and swaying. Pathways and wheeled toys offer opportunities to move at different speeds. Play structures offer the opportunity to climb up, down, through, and over and to experiment with large motor skills.

### ***Intellectual Domain***

The playspace should offer appropriate opportunities for intellectual development, including language skills, problem solving, perspective taking, memory, and creativity. Loose materials, moveable objects, and props stimulate imagination, discovery, and imaginative play. A sand play area is great for constructive play. Navigating a climbing structure or exploring the topography of a multipurpose, open grassy area develops spatial understanding. Age-appropriate risk and challenge are important elements in an intellectually stimulating environment for young children.

### ***Social Domain***

Play has shown to contribute to the development of social skills such as taking turns, collaborating, and following rules, as well as empathy, self-regulation, impulse control, and motivation. Outdoor environments designed with social activities in mind for child-child interactions and adult-child interactions include quiet spaces for both solitary and parallel play. Small-group play and larger-group play can occur on decks, stages, and sitting and gathering places. Pretend play features include playhouses and other imaginative props or natural objects.

### ***Natural Domain***

Including elements from the Natural Domain provides opportunities for children to be in physical contact with the natural environment. Nontoxic garden plants, hedges, bushes, enclosures, raised-bed gardens and planters, ground covers, multipurpose lawns, hills, and natural objects like logs, leaves, sticks, water, and sand all contribute to this domain.

### ***Free Play***

A Free Play area consists of an open space that offer opportunities for lots of movements and social interaction in unstructured play activities, i.e., open areas with appropriate surfacing for larger group play, running, games, and dramatic play.

