

# Why do children play?

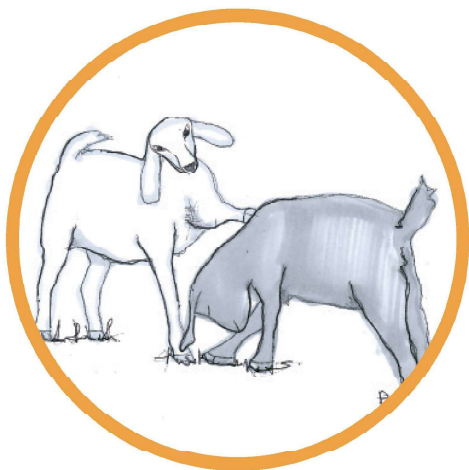
*“Play is the work of the child” – Maria Montessori*



Imagine for a moment a newborn baby. Their first fragile days are consumed with eating, sleeping, and crying - fulfilling their basic needs to stay alive. Have you ever considered how babies know to breathe in and out, to eat when they are hungry, sleep when they are tired, and cry when they need food, or rest, or care? Did someone tell them to do so? Did they read it in a book? Of course not. All babies are born with an inborn, biological, instinctual drive to stay alive and thrive - to give their bodies what they need to survive and grow.



As babies grow into children, their survival instinct remains just as strong. In order to successfully develop into adulthood, children must learn to use their bodies and develop their minds. They must learn to understand the world around them and how to interact with the people and things in it. How do children learn these crucial life skills? Through play. Play is the inborn tool our young brains use to learn and adapt to their environment. It is a powerful biological drive, as powerful as the drive to eat and sleep. Without time and space to play, it is difficult, if not impossible for children to learn to successfully navigate the world.



Play is so deep in us that we share it with other life on earth. Have you ever noticed animals play? Perhaps you've seen two young puppies wrestling or two newborn goat kids butting heads. They look like they are fighting, but any onlooker can tell they are not trying to harm one another. So what are they doing? Through play, they're practicing the skills they will need to survive as adults.



We can see the fundamental importance of play for human communities in its existence across every culture and throughout history. In the 4th century B.C., the Greek philosopher Plato wrote, "The most effective kind of education is that a child should play amongst lovely things." Across Africa, Asia, Australia, the Americas, and Europe, communities in cities and remote villages have developed games, riddles, and play traditions that are passed down for hundreds, even thousands of years.

For example, on the remote Pacific Islands of Kiribati, children throughout generations have played a game called "Te Boiri" in which a ball is kicked between players, never letting it touch the ground.<sup>16</sup>



In the West African country of Nigeria, a game of throwing and catching stones, called "Okwe" is said to be "as old as man."<sup>11</sup>



The chasing and tagging game of "Kabaddi" is played all throughout Asia and believed to be more than 4,000 years old.<sup>11</sup>

Surely you can think of games similar to these from your own culture that you happily devoted hours to as a child. Perhaps you learned them from an older sibling or friend, or were taught the rules by a parent or teacher. Why is it that play traditions like these exist across cultures and are persevered through time?

The simple reason is that children enjoy and delight in play. The reason play is enjoyable is the same reason laying down to sleep after a tiring day or eating a delicious meal when we are hungry feels so good. Our body rewards us with pleasurable hormones when we do things that are essential to our survival so that we do them more. The architecture of the human brain grows most rapidly in childhood and requires stimulating experiences for healthy development. Scientists, doctors, and psychologists have found evidence that when at play, children's brains are engaged in rich developmental work. It is this work that leads to the myriad of benefits from play we learned about in chapter 1.

Children are naturally driven to play because they instinctually know it is good for them. Just as a growing child needs food to develop a healthy body, a growing mind needs nourishment as well. Play is the nourishment of the mind.

**90% of brain development happens by the age of 5.<sup>17</sup>**

Unfortunately, play is commonly regarded as frivolous and trivial. All over the world, children at play are told by well-meaning adults to "be serious," "do something more productive," or "stop wasting time." Work and learning are viewed as more important than play. However, they are not opposites. Playing is learning and learning is playing! Once we understand the importance of play in a young child's brain development, we know that play IS learning. In the words of the famous physician and educator, Maria Montessori, "Play is the work of the child."