

Introduction

Play in the early years of life has a profound and lasting influence on a child's health, wellbeing, and long-term development. Studies have shown early play experiences to shape a child's physical growth, capacity for learning, chances of finishing school, future employability, and even income. This paper brings together a range of evidence spanning the fields of evolutionary psychology, child development, sociology, pediatrics, neuroscience, and economics to illustrate the importance of play for healthy child development and the potential for play interventions as powerful poverty reduction tools.

Childhood play is a universal phenomenon found across time and in all cultures. There is a deep evolutionary drive to play that can be identified among primates, mammals and even some invertebrates. For nearly all forms of life, play is the leading source of development in the early years. Play is particularly important for humans because of the complex social system in which we live, which we need to learn to successfully operate within and adapt to. (Gray P 2013, Pellis S et al, 2014)

Through play, children develop the neurological building blocks essential to further learning and growth. They form connections, build social and emotional skills, and develop positive long-term attitudes to discovery and learning. Play is not an alternative to learning. It is not a diversion from learning. Rather, it provides the foundation for learning and has an important role in shaping a child capacity for, and attitude towards subsequent learning.

