

# THE ANSWER IS PLAY

Young children are bombarded with sensations and information everyday. They struggle to understand their experiences and make sense of the world and their place in it. How can a child, four years old or even younger, hope to make sense of this complex world? The answer is play. Children learn and develop socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically through play.

In play, children can experiment freely, they can pretend to be different people and take on new roles (like mommy or daddy or a fire fighter or the Big Bad Wolf). Because play gives children the opportunity to pretend, it gives them the ability to see the world from different perspectives. In play, children can sort and organize all kinds of materials and use objects at hand to represent other objects. How many times have you heard your child hold up an object and say, "Pretend this is (an airplane, a flower, a doggie, etc.)?" The ability to make believe with objects is important in the development of children's thinking. Play is also one of the most powerful tools children have to express their thoughts and feelings.

As your child grows, you will see the developmental stages manifested in their play. At about the age of two, children pretend to cry, sleep, and eat. Then they begin to include stuffed animals, dolls, and other toys in their play. They also begin to pretend with objects – a box becomes a car or a block can be a telephone.

When children are about three years old, they like to play make-believe with others. Their play becomes more complex. The play of four and five year olds is focused on taking on different roles, especially those of adults in their lives. These first play experiences tend to focus on their experiences at home. Children pretend to cook, clean, care for younger children, go off to work, etc. This kind of play helps children make sense of their world and work through any fears or anxieties in a safe context.

There are lots of ways that you can encourage play at home. One way is to turn off the TV and put away the video games. When you buy toys, buy ones that are open-ended; that allow for children's creativity and imagination. Capitalize on your child's interests. Is she particularly fascinated by a book you have just read together? Does he constantly talk about a movie your family saw together last weekend? Provide props for your child to use in pretend play.

One of the most powerful play experiences your child will ever have is to play with you. Can you imagine a more rewarding experience than playing alongside your child?