

A close-up photograph of a young child's hands stacking colorful wooden blocks. The child is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. The blocks are stacked in a tower, with colors including green, red, yellow, orange, blue, and green. The background is a soft, out-of-focus red wall. The child's face is partially visible at the top, looking down at the blocks.

How free play
helps your
child build
knowledge,
skills, and
creativity at
his own pace

by **Walter Drew, Ed.D.**

PHOTO: EWA-AHLIN/CANOPY PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER

Endless Possibilities ▶

Old cardboard tubes, used Styrofoam packing, scraps of yarn . . . these may seem like ordinary objects you might naturally want to toss out. Don't. In the hands of your child, they are gold. They are building blocks of a powerful learning experience called *open-ended play*.

A child engaged in open-ended play is simply going with the flow. He is exploring *open-ended* materials—objects that have multiple uses and infinite possibilities, like the ones mentioned above, and

vision, and patience. Dealing with the infinite possibilities before him takes a big leap of faith. Making something no one has ever seen before requires trial and error and problem-solving and offers him the chance to create order and express meaning.

ENCOURAGE A “HAPPY TALENT”

In her book *Playing to Get Smart*, Betty Jones, Ph.D., urges parents to understand that children and adults who are skilled at play with both things and ideas, have the power, influence, and capacity to

and decisions to make. This format offers great potential for self-discovery.

No Errors. Since trial and error is part of open-ended play, unintended mistakes cause children to pause and wonder. “Errors” produce fascination and foster new creation. Self-initiating behaviors are developed.

Liberty at last. Open-ended play gives children a sense of freedom and autonomy to develop initiative and self-confidence. They enjoy making choices themselves, affirming their ability to be responsible and self-directed.

PLAY Time!

Here's how to make the most of open-ended play with your child:

- **Save those scraps!** When the paper towels are used up, hold on to the cardboard tube. Keep plastic caps, fabric pieces, pipe cleaners, and Styrofoam packing peanuts on hand to go with blocks, Legos, paints, and so on, for spontaneous play.
- **Trust and value the play process as a profoundly meaningful experience that develops your child's creative power. Observe and listen carefully while interacting with your child during play. Free yourself from the need to control your child's actions and resist the urge to keep him “on task.”**
- **Help your child reflect upon the process afterward by asking, *What did you learn? How did you feel? What are you proud of achieving?***
- **Visit a Reusable Resource Center. Located around the country, these centers collect unwanted industrial by-products, such as foam and plastic, and provide play workshops for educators, parents, and teachers. Visit www.reusableresources.org for more information.**

others, such as paint, clay, sand, mud, water, blocks, and Legos. There are no expectations, no specific problems to solve, no rules to follow, and no pressure to produce a finished product. It's all about free play—the freedom to invent and discover. He may end up making a cool castle for his action figures, or a funky pile of old cardboard tubes, used packing, and scraps of yarn.

By simply fiddling around with a wide range of materials, your child practices a wealth of brain-boosting skills that will serve him in school and throughout his life. Just think of what it takes for him to make sense of the unstructured nature of the materials—imagination, creativity,

create meaningful lives. They are more receptive to ambiguity than those who are stuck in the way things are or were. Play is a “happy talent.”

Open-ended play helps foster happy talent in a relaxed way. It also supports the mission behind the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2006 *Report on the Importance of Play*, which emphasizes that all children need free, undirected play for creative growth, self-reflection, and decompression. Here's why it works:

Less pressure. With no predetermined outcome, open-ended play eases off the gas pedal of achievement and allows children to focus on creating based on inner inspiration. During play, children have choices

BE AN INSPIRATIONAL PARTNER

To get started with free play, go on a house hunt for open-ended materials, including plastic caps, fabric, wire, cardboard boxes, blocks, paints, and clay. Try a nature walk where you can gather twigs, leaves, and feathers. The list is endless. You may want to include your child in this stage to invest him early in the process and get him primed for the experience.

Find a safe, roomy work area, set out the items, and allow your child to explore without interruption. You may want to initiate play by saying, “Here are some interesting materials to play with.” Then explore the materials with your own hands to see how they feel. Manipulate and play with them a bit to model, but be sure to leave detailed directions out of the mix. Remember, this is your child's playtime.

Some children need adult stimulation to sustain their play. If you find that's the case, you can become an audience member, a comfort, or an interested party who inspires by your presence. Your open attitude fosters exploration. In time, you may want to invite a playmate over who can join in the experience and help sustain play.

You can also engage in “parallel” play alongside your child (build your own cool castle!). You'll find you “re-create” and refresh your own energy while not stifling your child's. Just keep in mind: open-ended play is not a competition. It's a joy. **P&C**

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