



MEGA BLOKS Early Childhood Education Toolkit

These days we rely heavily on technology and it is making its way into aspects of our lives where it maybe shouldn't be as prevalent – including the development of toddlers. There is no denying that tablets and smart phones offer learning opportunities, but it's important to make time for imaginative play with your toddlers.

Therapist, author and keynote speaker Alyson Schafer has partnered with MEGA BLOKS to help parents to get the most out of playtime with their kids.



Today's Problem: Playing with our Kids

The fact is “playing with our kids” turns out to be more of a challenge for the average family than we realize. Kids demand their parents' attention and in these time-strapped days, when parents are busier than ever and since technology and gaming is so handy it's a simple quick fix to turn on a kid app.

Stats on screen time for children in Canada show that while the recommendation is zero hours for those under two and only 2 hours a day for preschoolers, many children are on about four times more than recommended! This should concern *all* parents. It's a slippery slope we are sliding down and play - the old fashion kind - is critical to a child's development. In fact, play is the work of childhood and it's becoming more and more rare, but we can change that!

The Power of Play

Yes, educational games have proven to improve some skills, but free play is the natural way our brains were meant to develop. Children are experiential learners and need to interact in real time, with the real world. Let's use the simple example of a toddler stacking a set of MEGA BLOKS. What may seem cute and mundane to a parent is in fact, benefiting the child in a myriad of ways:

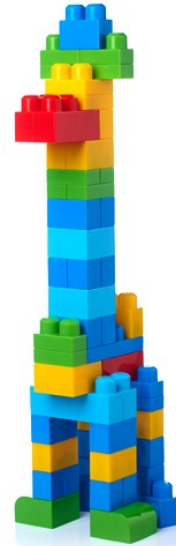
- Developing hand eye co-ordination
- Developing fine motor skills
- Problem solving ability
- Creativity
- Math and sequencing skills
- Color recognition
- Balance / symmetry / gravity



What Tech Won't Teach Your Child

Yes, a child can swipe a screen to drop and drag blocks to stack, but what they are missing in virtual block stacking is the deep learning of such concepts as:

- How to widen the base to support a taller stack
- The feeling of teetering as they get higher and the stability decreases
- The time, persistence and patience that slows the process because if they fall, you can't simply hit the "undo" button and start again – you have a mess of blocks and a big job ahead of you to start afresh.
- Social encouragement - if you have a sibling they will be more likely to help you or play with you, even if only to cheer you on and talk while you work. Heads down in a screen means less verbalization with those around you, and a more solitary experience overall.



Kids Don't Know How To Play Alone Any More

It's more than just lack of time that impeded playtime for preschoolers. Many parents have not put an emphasis on teaching their children independent play, and so children expect their parents to either play with them or to entertain them. Changing the child's expectations for whose responsibility it is to overcome boredom and for developing the creativity to invent games, needs to be developed in the early years. But how?

Tips For Helping Kids Learn to Play

1. Children Thrive On Routine and Predictability

Children thrive on routines because they like life to be predictable. You will develop more patience in your child if you create a set playtime and stick with it. They will be less likely to pull on your pant leg begging you to play with them all day long if they know you have a set play time and honour it. Part of the routine could be doing certain activities on certain days or certain times – for example, it could be MEGA BLOKS Monday to start the week off.

2. Create Independent Play Time Too

Each day should include "parental playtime" and "independent playtime". A good time to initiate independent playtime is when they start losing interest in their afternoon nap. Instead of sleeping you can explain: "you don't have to sleep but please stay in your room and play quietly." Help them come up with a few ideas of what they would like to play with and help get them set up. As they get older, increase the length of time and allow them to play in the playroom or living room where the toys are, but to do so without your involvement. You are NOT available.



In order for this to be successful a child needs to feel they have had sufficient engagement and connection with their parent, so this works best if you spend time playing with them and giving them your full attention just before you ask them to play independently.

Establishing a set together playtime and independent play time each day ensures your child has time with you too. Most families have the “intention” of playing with their children but often say “later, just a minute, after this” and in actuality entire days can go by before we actually stop and play with our kids.

3. Chores Can Be Play Too

No, you don't have to play all day. Children should not think they are the centre of your universe- you have other responsibilities too! Invite your child to help you fold laundry or put grocery items away. Doing things together is like playtime for a child too. They learn skills and how to be helpful instead of annoying you with complaints of boredom (and that easy temptation to turn to screen time).



4. Round-out Your Activities

Can't think of what to do with your child? The power of Google and Pinterest can help you come up with fun ideas. Look for activities in a range of developmental areas:

- Music
- Storytime
- Arts and crafts
- Games with rules (go fish/uno)
- Imagination/make believe games (dress-up)
- Large motor skills (running, throwing a ball, crawling through tubes)
- Fine motor – MEGA BLOKS, safety scissors, etc.

5. Make a Good Organized Play Space

Kids need a place to play and it should be equipped with basic items and without parental worry of safety, noise, spills and property damage. Each item needs a home: a basket, shelf or box. Toys left lying around get ignored and become wallpaper. Art supplies and other items like glue and glitter that need supervision should be kept together in organizational containers in a child-proof place.

If you have out more toys than you child can clean up in 5 minutes, you have too much out in your playroom. Instead, create your own “toy lending library” and store away the excess. Have your child “refresh the toys” by swapping out toys each week. If you only allow one puzzle in the toy room, then the child can swap out one from the playroom from one that is in storage. That means when the puzzle is out that week they will be excited to make it since they have not seen it in a month or so!



6. Let the Child Lead

When you join your child in play, let them lead the play. It can be hard for a parent to not want to teach or correct or show their child a better way, but it can come across as criticism and hinder play. This is their time to explore and learn through mistakes. This is their time to control their environment. If they play zoo, you can be an animal. If they play house, you can be a neighbor coming for tea. If they want to use only green blocks, let them have that colour.

Skill Development Through Play

Physical

Children understand their world through their senses, especially touch. Watch their hands, wrists and fingers as they play. Random movements become intentional ones as they practice how high they can build or combine different pieces to create something new. Over time, their body and brain work together with ease.

- Fine Motor Skills
 - Children develop strong fine motor skills through practice, patience and determination.
 - Manipulating MEGA BLOKS of different shapes and sizes is an ideal way to develop little ones' hands, wrists and fingers.
 - These small muscle movements also serve children well in later school learning.
- Gross Motor Skills
 - Children learn with their whole body.
 - But coordination of hands, arms, legs and feet develops over the course of several years.
 - Playing with MEGA BLOKS supports skills like reaching, pushing, stacking and balance, so that children tackle greater challenges.
- Hand-eye Coordination
 - Children love to reach, grab, push, pull and connect things.
 - The invisible skill that makes this play successful is hand-eye coordination.





Creativity

Children are naturally curious learners, with incredible brain potential. Watch as your child picks up a Mega Blok, turns it over and investigates what's underneath. As their understanding grows, they will move from merely copying you to considering what they can build on their own. Being in charge of play feels so good to them!

- Curiosity
 - Curiosity is essential to learning.
 - Watch the joy and anticipation on your child's face as she makes new discoveries.
 - Even before she can speak, invisible learning is taking place.
 - As she explores and experiments, "What if" questions are being answered and early learning is taking place.
- Initiative
 - Most children enjoy the freedom to explore while playing.
 - Supporting her initiative now sets the stage for later independence.
- Imagination
 - Children see possibilities where adults see only rules.
 - A stack of blocks can be a tower, a school, or a superhero's castle to a young mind.
 - This opportunity to create, wildly imagine and - even better - be in charge is an enormous benefit that MEGA BLOKS play offers to youngsters.



Cognitive

Children's imagination takes off through trial-and-error and creative play. Watch as your child's patience and focus increase, while placing blocks together of the same size, shape or color. This ability to categorize is an important skill that will come in handy later, when children learn math concepts.

- Reasoning & Problem Solving
 - Children are natural problem-solvers because they are born curious and curiosity fuels learning.
 - As they experiment with new combinations of MEGA BLOKS, they are building key skills like planning, trial and error, and accidental discovery that will serve them well in school and beyond.
- Focus & Attention
 - Children are very interested learners, yet they need practice to become less distractible.



- Playing with toys that present a challenge or are not too easy for them to put together teaches children valuable, lifelong skills like persistence.
- By keeping them engaged and focused on tasks like matching blocks into patterns and playful completion of a goal, young minds are rewarded!
- Love of Learning
 - Children discover through vision and touch that the world is made up of different shapes and colors.
 - Play helps their brain to see patterns, to learn the concept of "same" vs. "different" and to match similar items together into meaningful categories.

Social

Children become good playmates through practice and with parents' help. At an early age, it's normal for them to prefer solitary play. Parents play a key role in helping them expand their world to include peers.

- Communication
 - Children communicate their needs from the start with their body language, cries and other expressions of emotion.
 - Their expectation is that the world centers around them. Through play, parents can help their toddlers 'graduate' from that viewpoint to consider the needs and emotions of others.
- Cooperation
 - Children will eventually learn to share, but it's not their first instinct.
 - Parents can support their child's social learning on the path to sharing by guiding play at first.
 - Taking turns and practice sharing will lay the foundation for their youngster becoming a sought-after playmate.
- Self-esteem & Confidence
 - Children learn so much about themselves, how they deals with things, and whether they are capable through play.
 - As their play skills develop and they experience success with MEGA BLOKS, they will show their pride and feel more independent in the world outside the playroom.





Language

Children's language progresses from letters to words to meanings. But long before they can clearly express their needs, their brains are taking in words and concepts at an amazing rate. As their first teacher, you are the seat of this learning. So talk away as you play with them!

- Learning to Read
 - For children, few skills are more exciting to witness than learning to read.
 - Literacy is achieved through many smaller steps, each of which is boosted through parent support.
 - One such step could be sounding out the letters or lining up blocks to form a simple word - like FUN.
- Learning to Talk
 - Children quickly learn the power and excitement of words.
 - As they discover that sounds have meaning and words match objects, their language skills explode.
 - Through shared play, the link between words and inspiring play comes to life.



- Organization
 - Children express their ideas and thoughts through language and play.
 - Parents can help their kids achieve a stronger sense of how the world works by encouraging communication skills.
 - Playing together is a perfect way to uncover your child's unique view of the world.