

The Power of Play

When babies begin to engage with the world and play with toys, it is a monumental and exciting milestone in their development. Now, they can interact with their surroundings and achieve pleasure from play. This means that they are not as reliant on a caregiver for stimulation, but are more independent and free to make their own choices.

As children grow older and their coordination improves, they move from soft and fuzzy ambiguous toys to more age and gender specific toys, like dolls and cars. Kids play with these toys so that they can learn about how the world works. They play with dolls so they can learn about relationships and nurturing. They battle it out with soldiers to learn about conflict resolution. They play to learn about life. Playing is as important for a child's mental health and social development as is attachment to a parent or caregiver. It is vital.

I remember when I was growing up, I had a baby doll that had to be with me at all times. She was my little friend. She was nice to me when my sister wasn't and she comforted me when no one else could. Her name changed a few times from Amy to Heather to Cindy, but she was still a trusty friend and I needed her. When all of my friends were gathering Barbies and Cabbage Patch Kids, I still had my doll, whatever her name was.

Until recently, I had forgotten all about Amy-Heather-Cindy and how important she was to me. Right now, my girls have a rather large collection of Webkinz. If you don't know about these little creatures yet, you will soon enough. Basically, Webkinz are stuffed animals that come with a registration for a social networking website for kids. Think Facebook for kids plus a stuffed animal.

Anyway, one day a few weeks ago, my 6 year old was misbehaving and as a punishment, she lost privileges to play with her Webkinz collection. As soon as I said it, she looked up at me with a tear in her eye as I expressed my disappointment with her behavior and said, "But Mommy, I need them. They are my friends." Sometimes kids say things that melt your heart and instantly make you remember how important the little things in life really are.

Since that day, we have started a new type of consequence and reward system. Right now, my girls are earning points to join Club Penguin (another online social networking site for kids, but without the stuffed animals). They will earn points with good behavior to get rewards and if they don't behave, it will take longer for them to reach their goal. Just like real life!

Playing is something that we don't value enough for our children as often times we schedule them in too many classes and activities to have enough time to play. Just as our job as parents is to help our kids to thrive, playing is their job. It is what they are supposed to do! So, when was the last time you really got down and played with your child? Did you feel comfortable playing or did you feel like you didn't know how to play anymore? Do you have any dolls or toys that you play with? Are you laughing at me (or with me)?

For those of you who are feeling a bit out of practice in the playing department, I have an idea for you. No, I am not crazy! This fall marks the 25th anniversary of the Cabbage Patch Kid and to commemorate this milestone, Cabbage Patch has released a Limited Edition 25th Anniversary Cabbage Patch Kid. The dolls will have the same faces, clothing and names made in the same materials as the original Cabbage Patch Kids and they will bring you back mentally to a time when you knew how to play. Go out and get yourself a Cabbage Patch Kid and start playing! If you don't feel like buying a new dool quite yet, you can at least re-live a little and post your Cabbage Patch memories on the site.

Alright, so maybe you never had a Cabbage Patch Kid, but you always wanted one (like me). So, this will be the gift that you always wanted and now that you are all grown up, you can give to yourself. Or, if there is some other toy that you always wanted as a kid and never got, go ahead and live a little. Splurge on that miniature race track you always dreamed of!

Everyone needs to play in order to learn about and enjoy life. Whether you play alone or with your kids, make a choice to play just a little bit every day and see what joy comes back into your life. Now, if buying a toy isn't going to inspire you to play, what will?

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