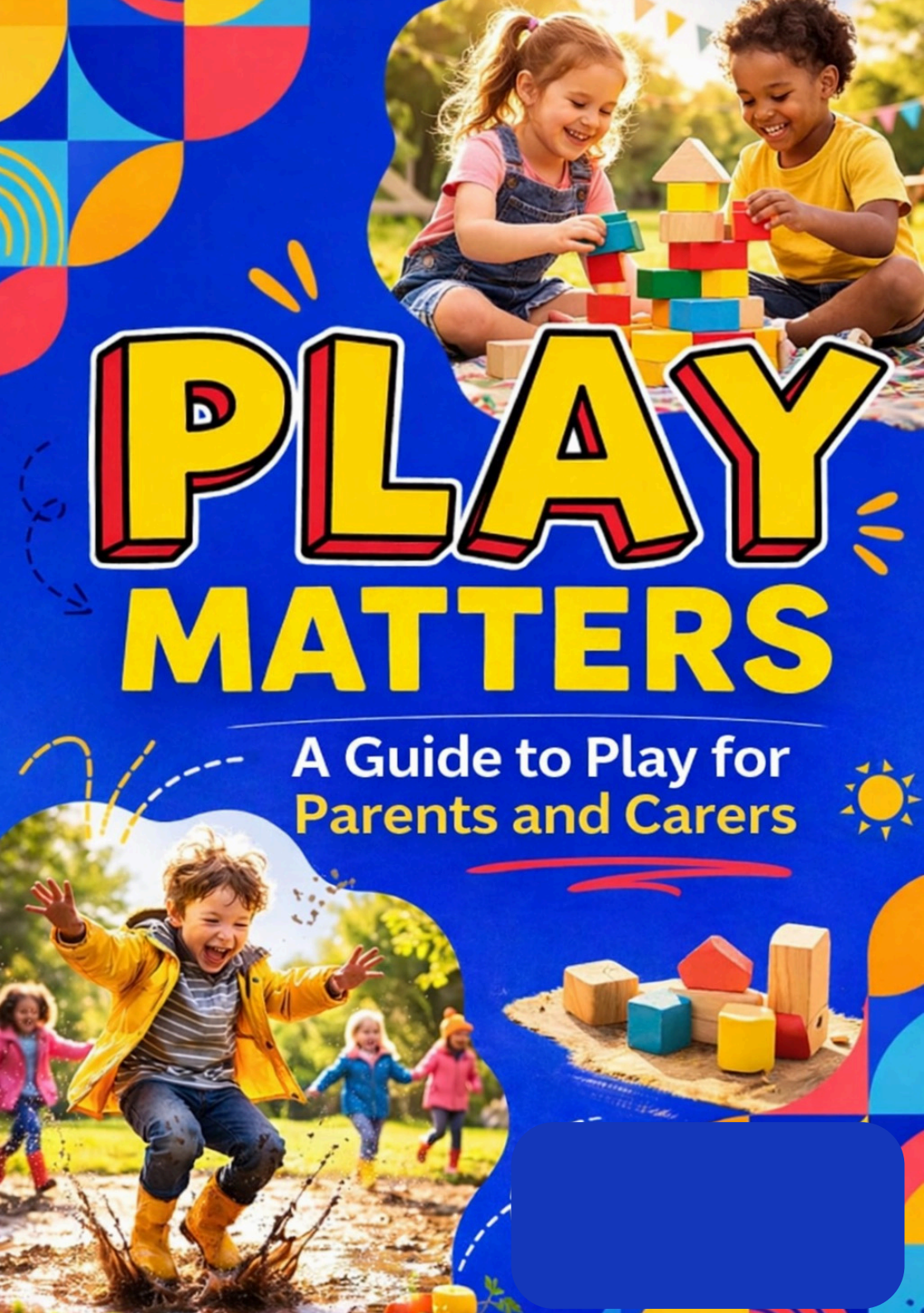




PLAY MATTERS

A Guide to Play for
Parents and Carers



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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Play is not an extra.
It is not a reward.
It is not something to squeeze in when the
“real learning” is finished.
Play is the foundation.

As parents and carers, you are your child's first and most important educators. Long before children step into nurseries or schools, they are learning through everyday moments, building towers from cushions, stirring imaginary soups, chasing shadows in the garden, asking “why?” for the fiftieth time before breakfast.

This guide was written for you.
It was created to offer reassurance, clarity and confidence in a world that can sometimes feel noisy about what children “should” be doing. There are headlines about school readiness, checklists about milestones, and pressures that can make it seem as though childhood is something to hurry through.
We believe something different.
We believe childhood deserves to be protected.
We believe play builds brains, relationships and resilience.
We believe connection comes before correction and we believe that love and nurture are not soft options, they are the strongest foundations of all.

“Play is not preparation for life. Play is life, and childhood deserves to be lived fully.”

Inside this guide, you will find simple explanations, practical ideas and reflections linked to some of the chapters in Play Matters. You do not need specialist training. You do not need expensive resources. You do not need to replicate a classroom at home.

You need time.
You need presence.
You need permission to trust yourself.

Play is how children make sense of the world.
When we protect play, we protect curiosity.
When we protect curiosity, we protect learning and when we protect learning, we protect childhood.

When play matters at home, children flourish everywhere.

Aaron Bradbury

EDITOR



PLAY AND JOY

Why Joy Matters More Than We Think

When we think about play, we often think about toys.

But play isn't really about toys.
It's about joy.

It's about the sparkle in your child's eyes
when they discover something new.
It's about laughter that fills the kitchen.
"Watch this!"

Joy is not extra.

Joy is not a reward for learning.

Joy is learning.

When children experience joy, their
brains release chemicals that help
them feel safe and connected. And
when children feel safe and connected,
they are more able to explore,
take risks, solve problems and build
relationships.



Joy builds:

- Emotional wellbeing
- Confidence
- Curiosity
- Resilience
- Stronger parent-child bonds

Play is how children make sense of
the world. But it is also how they
experience belonging.

When we **protect joyful play**,
we are protecting childhood.

PLAY AND JOY

What This Looks Like at Home

- ✓ You don't need **expensive toys**.
- ✓ You don't need a **perfectly set-up playroom**.
- ✓ You don't need to be "good at playing".

You just need to be present.

**Here are simple ways
to bring more joyful play into everyday life:**

1 Follow their lead

For 10-minutes each day, let your child decide what you are playing. No correcting. No teaching. Just joining in.

2 Be silly

Children connect through laughter. Make funny voices. Pretend the spoon is a rocket. Dance in the kitchen.

5 Say "yes" more often

If it's safe, let them jump in the puddle.
Let them build the sofa fort.
Let them mix the colours.

3 Put your phone away

Even short moments of undivided attention matter deeply.

4 Slow down

Children don't rush joy.
Try not to either.

Joy does not require perfection.

It requires connection.

And when **children feel that connection,**
they flourish.



PLAYFUL LEARNING FROM BIRTH

Your Baby Is Already Playing

Play doesn't start when children can walk.
It starts from the very beginning.

When your baby looks into your eyes, that is play.
When they kick their legs, that is play.
When they babble and wait for you to respond, that is play.

From birth, children learn through:

-  Touch
-  Movement
-  Sound
-  Repetition
-  Faces
-  Connection

**Babies don't need lessons.
They need relationships.**

Every cuddle, every song, every time you respond
to their cry, you are **building their brain**.

Did You Know?

In the early months and years, the brain grows
more quickly than at any other time in life.

Connections are forming constantly.

The experiences your child has now lay the
foundations for language, emotional regulation,
problem-solving and confidence.

Play in the early years is not about “getting ahead.”
It is about **building secure foundations**.



PLAYFUL LEARNING FROM BIRTH

What This Looks Like at Home

- ✓ You don't need **flashcards**.
- ✓ You don't need **apps**.
- ✓ You don't need to constantly entertain.

**You just need simple,
repeated, loving interactions.**



**Here are powerful ways to support playful
learning from birth:**

1 Talk about everything

Narrate your day.

"I'm washing your hands."

"That water feels warm."

"You're kicking your legs!"

Language grows through conversation,
even before children can speak.



2 Get down on the floor

Floor time builds strength,
coordination and curiosity.

Babies need space to move.

3 Repeat songs and rhymes

Repetition builds memory and
security. Don't worry about singing
perfectly, your voice is their favourite.

5 Let them explore safely

Different textures. Different sounds.
Different objects.
Exploration builds confidence.

4 Respond to babble

When your baby makes a sound,
Answer it. Pause.

This is the beginning of conversation.



**The early years is not a race.
It is a relationship.**

And Playful connection now builds confidence for life.

THE PLAYFUL BRAIN

Play Is Building Your Child's Brain

Every time your child builds a tower...
Negotiates whose turn it is...
Pretends to be a dragon...
Climbs a tree...
Their brain is **changing**.

Play is not a break from learning.
Play is how the brain learns best.

When children play, they are:

- ✓ Solving problems
- ✓ Testing ideas
- ✓ Managing emotions
- ✓ Practising language
- ✓ Building memory
- ✓ Developing self-control

And they are **doing all of this**
without even realising it.

Play allows children to try, fail,
adjust and try again safely.

It gives them the **space** to think.
It gives them the **freedom** to **imagine**.
It gives them the confidence to persist,
and those skills matter far beyond
childhood.



THE PLAYFUL BRAIN

Did You Know?

When children experience **playful**, positive interactions, their brains release chemicals that strengthen neural connections.

Repeated playful experiences literally “wire” the brain for learning, emotional regulation and resilience.



What This Looks Like at Home

You don't **need to “teach”** all the time.

In fact, sometimes the most powerful thing you can do... **is step back.**

Here's how to support a playful brain:

1 Let them struggle (a little)

If the puzzle piece doesn't fit, pause before stepping in. Struggle builds thinking skills.

2 Offer open-ended materials

Blocks. Boxes. Scarves. Wooden spoons. Loose parts invite imagination.

3 Encourage pretend play

Imagination strengthens language and emotional understanding.

4 Celebrate effort, not outcome

Instead of “That's perfect”, try “You worked really hard on that.”

5 Protect unstructured time

Not every minute needs organising. Boredom can spark creativity.



**Brains grow through experience.
Play is rich experience.**

PLAY AND TECHNOLOGY

Screens and Real Play

Technology is part of modern life.

- ✓ It's not about fear.
- ✓ It's about **balance**.

Screens can:

- 😊 Entertain
- 💡 Inform
- 💬 Connect

But screens cannot replace:

- ➡ Physical movement
- 👐 Sensory experience
- 💬 Face-to-face interaction
- 💡 Imaginative creation



Did You Know?

Young children's brains develop best through **multi-sensory experiences**, using their hands, bodies and voices.

Real-world play activates more areas of the brain than passive screen use.



Technology should support childhood, not replace it.

PLAY AND TECHNOLOGY

What This Looks Like at Home

This is about **balancing** technology and it's about intention.

1 Co-view when possible

Sit with your child.
Talk about what they're watching.

2 Ask open questions

"What did you think about that?"
"What might happen next?"

3 Balance screen time with outdoor time

Movement regulates mood.

4 Protect device-free moments

Mealtimes. Bedtime. Connection time.

5 Remember: you are more interesting than any app

Technology is a tool.
You are the relationship.



Technology is a tool. You are the relationship.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT & OUTDOOR PLAY

Children Need to Move to Think

Movement is **not** a break from learning.
Movement is learning.

When children climb, run, roll, balance and jump, they are developing:

- ➡ Strength
- ➡ Coordination
- ➡ Balance
- ➡ Spatial awareness
- ➡ Confidence
- ➡ Risk judgement

Physical play supports **brain development**.
It strengthens **attention**. It supports emotional
regulation. It builds **resilience**.

Outdoor play offers something
different from indoor play:

- ☀ Space.
- ➡ Freedom.
- 🌲 Challenge.
- 💧 Nature.

Children are designed to **move**
and when we restrict movement too much,
we restrict development.



Physical Development & Outdoors

Physical activity

increases blood flow to the brain, improving **concentration** and memory.

Regular movement supports emotional regulation and reduces stress in children.

What This Looks Like at Home:

- ✓ You don't need a large garden.
- ✓ You just need opportunities.

1 Visit parks regularly

Climbing frames build more than muscles.

2 Allow manageable risk

Instead of "Be careful!" try, "How can you do that safely?"

3 Embrace messy play

Mud, sand, water, these are rich learning experiences.

4 Walk when you can

Short journeys on foot build stamina and curiosity.

5 Let them test their limits

Confidence grows when children experience "I did it!"



Movement builds courage,
and courage builds **lifelong confidence.**

PLAY AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Play Belongs to Every Child

Every child communicates through play.

For some children, **play may look different**.

- ✓ It may be quieter.
- ✓ Repetitive.
- ✓ Sensory-focused.
- ✶ Highly physical.

But **difference** does not mean **deficit**.

Children with additional needs often use play to.

- ✶ **Regulate** sensory input
- ♥ Express emotion.
- ✓ **Build predictability**
- ✶ **Feel safe**

Inclusion does not mean changing the child.

It means adapting the environment.



Did You Know?

Play supports **neurological regulation**.

For children with additional needs, predictable and child-led play can reduce anxiety and increase confidence.

PLAY AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

What This Looks Like at Home

Trust your child's interests.

1 Follow sensory preferences

Some children love movement. Others prefer quiet focus.

2 Reduce overwhelm

Too many toys can feel stressful.

3 Respect repetition

Repetition builds security.

4 Use visual supports if helpful

Simple routines can increase independence.

5 Celebrate small steps

Progress is not a race.

Play should feel safe,
and **safety** is the
foundation for growth.



PLAY in the EARLY YEARS CURRICULUM

Play Prepares Children for School and Life

There is often pressure to “get children ready.”
But readiness isn't about **worksheets**.
It's about:

- ✓ Communication
- ✓ Confidence
- ✓ Curiosity
- ✓ Emotional regulation
- ✓ Problem-solving

And play builds all of these.

Through play, children practise
taking turns. They experiment
with numbers.

They **explore storytelling**,

They **develop independence**.

Play builds the foundations
that formal learning rests upon.



PLAY IN KEY STAGE ONE

Play Strengthens Learning for School and Life

There can be pressure in **Key Stage One** to “move on” from play.

But **play** is not something children grow out of.

It's supports:

- ✓ Reading and writing
- ✓ Mathematical thinking
- ✓ Collaboration and teamwork
- ✓ Confidence and independence
- ✓ Emotional regulation
- ✓ Creativity and imagination
- ✓ Resilience and problem-solving

Play is how children deepen their understanding.

Through play, children

- Apply **phonics** in meaningful contexts
- Use **maths** in real-life situations
- Build **stories** and **develop** vocabulary
- Test **ideas** and take risks
- Learn to **negotiate** and resolve conflict
- Strengthen friendships
- Practise independence

In **Key Stage One**, play doesn't replace learning.

Play enhances it.

It helps children move from **exploration** to **mastery**.

It builds secure foundations for lifelong learning.

Because **play still matters** at 5, 6 and 7.



PLAY AND Sustainability

Nature Is the Original Playground

Children don't need plastic to play.



Sticks become **wands**.



Leaves become **money**.



Cardboard becomes **castles**.



Nature invites imagination.

When children play **outdoors** and with **natural materials**, they:



Develop **creativity**



Build **environmental awareness**



Strengthen **sensory development**



Learn to **care**



Sustainability is not a lesson.

It is a relationship.

When children feel **connected** to the **natural world**, they are more likely to **protect it**.



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Did You Know?

- Open-ended natural materials encourage deeper imaginative thinking than highly structured toys.
- Nature-based play also supports **emotional wellbeing**.



PLAY AND SUSTAINABILITY

What This Looks Like at Home

- You don't need expensive eco-toys.
- You don't need perfect outdoor spaces.
- You don't need to be an expert in sustainability.

You just need simple, thoughtful choices.

Here are practical ways to bring sustainability into everyday play:

- 1 Use recycled materials for play**
Boxes. Tubes. Fabric scraps.
Loose parts invite imagination.
- 2 Go on "Nature Treasure" walks**
Collect leaves, stones, sticks.
Let children notice patterns, textures and change.
- 3 Plant something together**
Even a small pot on a windowsill.
Watching something grow builds care and patience.
- 4 Repair instead of replace**
Model care for belongings.
Children learn responsibility by watching you.
- 5 Spend time outdoors in all seasons**
Different weather brings different learning.
Rain, wind and sunshine all offer discovery.



When children care for the earth,
they are learning to care for their future.

Keep Play Close

If this guide helped, you can:

- ✓ Share it with another parent or carer
- ✓ Talk with your child's setting about how they protect play
- ✓ Create small pockets of play every day.
- ✓ Choose connection over perfection

Play doesn't need to be big.
It needs to be real.

Play is how children make sense of the world.

When we protect play, we protect learning.

When we protect learning, we protect childhood.

Because play matters.

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