



# Caregiver Play

## It's not just child's play: The importance of caregivers' play with children

- Good-quality interactive play between a caregiver and child in the early years lays the foundation for healthy child growth and development.
- Interactive play helps infants and children build trust in their caregiver while learning how to make sense of the world.
- Early play interactions help promote the development of the child's brain. Children who spend time playing with their caregivers tend to have fewer mood and behavioural problems, have better social skills, and are better able to communicate. As adolescents, they are also more able to empathise with others.
- Research in Singapore has shown that infants whose caregivers were more 'sensitive' (able to recognise and respond promptly to the child's needs) during play had better stress coping skills at age three and showed faster development of brain structures involved in emotion. Children also benefited when caregivers showed higher levels of positive emotions such as laughing and smiling during play.
- Good-quality play does not require long sessions or expensive toys. It can occur during everyday interactions, such as during bath time, and involve everyday objects in the house or outdoors, or it can even be imaginary. Several key features are:
  - Being responsive and sensitive to the child, such as through back-and-forth interactions guided by the child's cue and signals;
  - Being available and playful, such as by showing interest in the interaction through verbal and facial feedback;
  - Engaging in social games, such as peek-a-boo,
- and pretend play, such as roleplaying a supermarket visit;
  - Making play meaningful to the child, by drawing on the child's interests in age-appropriate ways;
  - Respecting the child as an individual, such as through following their lead in play and avoiding negative comments.
- Mobile device use by caregivers during play can negatively affect the quality of play with children. It distracts the caregiver from picking up and responding to the child's signals, reduces the amount of talking and new words spoken to the child, and may increase child stress.
- Recent cultural shifts have reduced opportunities for caregiver-child play, with caregivers becoming increasingly busy, an increased focus on academic achievement, and fewer safe play spaces. Furthermore, existing caregiver-child programmes may be cost-prohibitive for lower-income families.
- This highlights the need for:
  - Improved access to universal programmes and services that facilitate caregiver-child play;
  - Improved public communication about the importance of good-quality play for child development and what its key features are, including minimal mobile device use;
  - Improved policies and support for programmes that foster good-quality play.
- Research focused on Singapore's unique local context is needed for a more culturally appropriate understanding of how caregivers currently engage in play, the barriers faced in accessing resources, and the role of grandparents and foreign domestic helpers.

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