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Rudolph wants to play

NEWSLETTER

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RUDOLPH WANTS TO PLAY

We recently experienced the joyous season of Christmas and are at the beginning of yet another year. The end of the year can feel like it's flying by, packed to the brim with holidays, family gatherings, and travel. During this time of the year and through all the holiday fun, frolic and chaos; another highlight is Christmas carols. One such popular carol that I have always enjoyed listening to and singing along has been Rudolph the red nosed reindeer. The title of this month's newsletter is derived from something that struck me while singing this carol. There's a line in there that goes "... and they never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games...". Those of you have heard or sang this carol over the years are well aware how it ends on a very positive and happy note for this lone reindeer and how he goes *down in history*, quite literally!

Being a pediatric Occupational therapist, majority or almost all of my sessions look like "just play" and that I'm doing nothing more than engaging in one game or the other with the child in the session. On the outside it simply looks fun, easy and well put together; but internally and at a more intrinsic level there's a lot more to play than what it seems. Many a times I have been asked by parents as well as professionals that *You know you're just playing with them but yet they have picked up so many skills, is it that simple? Or that I didn't know that I could do so much and gain so much by playing with my child.* I have also had some parents coming up with questions such as *how do I engage with my child? My child just doesn't like to play with me, what do I do?*



Why should we let him play, there's so much to do, so much to write for homework, where is the time to play? What is the need to play, she manages perfectly fine on her own and doesn't need any more additional time spent doing something so routine".

The answers to these and many other questions that may have popped up over the years quite simply lies in me putting it down to the essential value play holds in a person's overall development as it largely contributes to physical, intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of not only children and youth but adults as well. Play in its essence serves many purposes.

It is an expression of happiness and freedom. Play, majority of the times is accompanied by smiles and laughter but it also brings home a feeling of involvement and that I can do it as this is what I want to do right now! It may not always have an end goal other than just enjoyment, but along the process we learn and pick up many skills.

We need to realise that the path or means of play holds more importance than the end. Do you recollect the initial few months of your child's development, how he/she would handle toys and explore them more with either his/her mouth or by manipulating it in different ways through sniffing, turning them around, throwing them away, making sounds with them, etc. This manipulation created opportunities to learn about different objects, relations, and about ways to interact and influence the direct environment. Imagine your child is playing with a kitchen set and pretending to bake a cupcake. Do you think if you step in and say to the child "You can stop what you're doing and I will make the cupcake for you, it will get done faster". Would your child appreciate it? Most certainly not! That would spoil all the fun. The process motivates and is more enjoyable to them than the actual end goal.

Play makes everything fun! What I'm getting at is that when things are introduced to a child in a play way manner there is lesser degree of resistance from the child. You would see them engaging much more willingly and achieving the goals that otherwise seem quite daunting. And these achievements later on integrate into helping them face day-to-day challenges with confidence. Any activity, structured or unstructured, that your children find fun and engaging is considered play for them. It allows them to increase their confidence through developing new skills. Pretend play games promote development of imagination and creativity. Playing games like Hide and Seek, Treasure hunt, Dumb charades encourage development as well as utilise your problem solving, motor planning skills and dealing with new and novel situations; whereas board games like Monopoly, Ludo work on addition, subtraction, and turn taking; Passing the parcel and Musical chairs help with turn taking, attention to task, faster processing speed, understanding the hidden rules, and build resilience, emotional flexibility through risk taking and challenge.

Along with working on problem solving, nurturing creativity, reasoning and picking up skill sets needed for everyday life, play also acts as a stepping stone for creating social bonds, initiating and holding onto friendships. When your child plays with others, he needs to interact as well as listen that are important for developing communication skills. It gives them the opportunity to socialize and mix with other children. Your child may lead the play but he has to simultaneously learn to be perceptive of others needs. Engaging in a group of children can help children learn to cooperate, share, mutually negotiate and decide, and to be assertive.



Even though the benefits gained from play for both children and parents are manifold, free play time has significantly reduced for some children. A study from the American Academy of Pediatrics titled - *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bond* addresses a variety of factors that have reduced play including a hurried lifestyle, changes in family structure, and increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of recess or free child-centered play.

Play is a cherished part of our growing years and a very precious time in a child's life, as the most important occupation of a child is play. We as adults, caregivers and professionals need to ensure and encourage our children to engage in play meaningfully. Create opportunities for yourself and your child to play together. Also create opportunities for the child to engage with other children in structured situations (e.g. play group, play dates) and social environments (e.g. playground, malls, eateries, etc.) This will provide your child with opportunities to learn about their environment and the wider community. Don't push your child too hard. Children develop in their own ways and at their own pace. The key to it is to keep it simple and just have fun!

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www.reachtherapycenterforchildren.com

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