

Taking Playtime Seriously

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Play is a universal, cross-cultural and necessary attribute of childhood, essential for development and essential for learning. Experts who study it say that play is intrinsic to children's natures, but still needs support and attention from the adults around them.

Children are natural players, right from the beginning. "It's hard to imagine when an infant or a toddler *isn't* playing," said Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, a professor of applied psychology at New York University who [studies play and learning in babies and young children](#). She cited, for example, the joys of mushing food, pulling books off a shelf or making noises rattling a paper bag.

"I don't like it when scientists think children are playing only when they sit down with some toys," she said. "Almost all the learning that goes on in the first years of life is in the context of exploration of the environment."

Dr. Tamis-LeMonda's research includes going into homes to look at everyday play, with a special focus on how play functions in language learning. "We think that all domains of development are informed by children engaging in play," she said. This certainly includes communication, with babies learning words and concepts as they engage with objects in their environment (ball, blue), spatial math concepts when they play with blocks (or pull the books off a shelf), getting motor practice as they climb and crawl and run.