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Gill's Notebook

No Propping, Please

We all want the best for the children in our care. We'll do whatever we can to help them grow up happy and healthy. But if we do everything we can, we may prevent them from doing everything *they* can.

A common example is propping up a child before she's ready to sit on her own. Cute and well-meaning as this may be, when a child is propped up by pillows or containers, she doesn't have to do the work necessary to get to that position on her own. And if this happens often enough, it can actually interrupt or leave gaps in her natural development process.

So what does it take to sit up on your own for the first time?

- **Strength:** Core muscle strength provides a stable base for the rest of the body. At the same time, upper body strength is needed to hold the head centered over the shoulders.
- **Primitive reflex release and postural reflex emergence:** During the period babies are learning to get themselves up on all fours and eventually turn and sit for themselves, the brain is dialing back primitive reflexes while triggering the postural reflexes in order to encourage the body to move in new ways.
- **Balance:** As with everything, balance underpins the ability to sit and stay upright, but to do this on her own, baby must learn to find her own sense of balance.



Children who get lots of floor time on their backs and tummies naturally build the strength and balance necessary to crawl and sit up when the reflexes are ready. Children who don't may struggle with one or more of these essential components.

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But more, when a child doesn't have the freedom to move and explore, her senses are not engaged. This creates what I call a "lazy brain." That is, when the world "comes to you," there is little motivation to go and discover things on your own. After all, the word "motivation" is derived from the Latin, *moveo*, or *to move*. When children move, they stimulate the brain, motivating curiosity, which in turn stimulates more movement, and the cycle begins again.

So if you want to *motivate* a child, be sure to *motorvate* her, by giving her the time and space she needs to move to and through the learning all by herself.

Gill's Notebook

“Asensory” Play

The other day, my grandchildren came for a visit and I had a big surprise for them—an empty refrigerator box. Hours of fun later, I found myself thinking about why cardboard boxes are such magnets for kids.

Now, I subscribe to the school of thought that rich sensory experiences are critical for early development. Yet, the very “asensory” nature of a cardboard box offers its own unique exploration of the senses. The brown color suggests nothing in particular. The smooth sides imply little. The cube structure defines empty space. The subtle smell lacks distraction. The sound of the cardboard folding is muted and music-less.

In other words, the very things cardboard boxes *lack* can be valuable contrasts to the more powerful and deliberate stimulation we traditionally think of as “sensory play.” In fact, this relief from the sensory world may explain, in part, why kids find the confines of a cardboard box so appealing. And, of course, its very neutrality is the blank slate upon which children so easily imprint their imaginations. Now that’s *not* something you want to put in a box.



When Is a Child Ready for Reading?

I often find that grown-ups are so excited to start a child on the road to independent reading, they don't stop to consider if she's ready or not. And not just cognitively, but physically. Reading requires a high level of eye fitness which depends on the type and amount of activity the eyes get in the early years.

And by activity, I don't mean time spent in front of a screen. Screen play occurs on a flat, 2-D plane, which has limited value for developing 3-D eye fitness. Focusing near and far is impossible on a screen. Furthermore, small screens (especially smartphones and tablets) do not let the eyes sweep widely to strengthen the muscles and fine-tune eye tracking. In fact, these mesmerizing, confined images create conditions for ocular lock, a frozen stare with no awareness or cognition of what's being seen.¹⁸

So what happens if you start teaching a child to read, but her eyes just aren't ready? While reading, she may:

- Get red, irritated eyes
- Rub her eyes a lot
- Get watery eyes
- Blink excessively
- Turn away to rest her eyes
- Jerk her eyes across the page
- Display a flicker or jump in her eye movement when the eyes reach the middle of the page

But far worse than a temporary case of eye strain, if the experience is difficult, frustrating, or even painful, it may leave a lasting negative impression, which could become an even bigger hurdle to reading later on.

In my view, if you want a child to love reading, there are two simple, powerful things you can do:

- Develop her eye fitness through lots of fun, playful, 3-D visual stimulation each and every day.
- Spend time reading with her one-on-one. Children love the individual attention, and sharing a book up close lets you point out important images, ideas, and words along the way.

Exposure to language from television screens and audio tracks does *not* enhance a young child's ability to learn language during the critical period of development from six to eight months.

Gill's Notebook

A Screen Is No Substitute for You

Since my area of expertise is children and movement, I'm sure you can guess where I stand on the subject of television, video, computer screens, smartphones, tablets, and so on for young children. Instinctively, anything that takes children away from active play doesn't sit right with me. But in fact, research has shown that screen time negatively affects natural development processes in many ways. One in particular is language and communication development.

Is All Language Stimulation Good Stimulation?

Common sense tells us that any type of language stimulation must be good for learning. But in fact, research shows that exposure to language from television screens and audio tracks does *not* enhance a young child's ability to learn language during the critical period of development from six to eight months.²³

Children learn language mainly through personal, human interaction.

The research goes on to say that children learn language mainly through personal, *human* interaction. Chances are, you're doing exactly what children need every day when you talk, laugh, sing, whisper, and giggle together—dialogue in real time vs. the monologue of digital/virtual experiences. Put simply, when it comes to language, there is no substitute for you!

Distractions Interrupt Concentration

Once again, common sense might argue that while screen time isn't an effective teacher of language skills, it doesn't really do any harm, so it's no big deal. Right? Actually, wrong. Other researchers have found that lights and sounds coming from television and video programs can *distract* children, preventing them from delving deeply into play, which in turn may inhibit their ability to concentrate.²⁴

Concentration means shutting out distractions. Many adults can do this even with noise all around them. But we can't expect the same of young children. They simply don't have the experience to filter out unimportant visual or auditory "pollution" in their environment.

Further, when you're distracted, it's hard to stay on task, no matter how old you are. Frustration can set in and may even make you want to quit

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altogether. When that dynamic is set up in a child's young mind, not only is her ability to concentrate at stake, but her perseverance may be at risk as well.

Atmosphere Matters

Life is busy and noisy. I'm not suggesting we shut children in a soundproof booth. But do pay attention to the atmosphere in which children play. I like to tell parents to think of a young child's playtime as homework. When older children do homework, the TV is usually off. The same rules should apply for little ones, whether at home or in a childcare or school setting.

Joint Attention

And please understand that there's a world of difference between your participation in playtime and the disembodied intrusion of a screen. That's because you provide the child with the exact social interaction she needs to learn language (and a whole lot more!). Experts call this *joint attention*.²⁵

For instance, when a parent or caregiver is looking at something, young babies' attention is drawn to the same thing. As you play with a child, you naturally talk about what you both are seeing and doing. Each time you do this, you help her understand her world while providing the words to describe it. And one day soon, she'll be the one telling you all about it!



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Respect the Mess

The traditional definition of *messy play* refers to different kinds of sensory materials children can use with their hands. For instance:

Wet or Viscous

Mud
Slime
Play dough
Clay
Paste
Finger paint
Snow
Soap, bubble bath, bath foam
Water

Dry or Textured

Sand
Dirt
Glitter
Markers
Crayons



Messy play materials are pretty much anything that can and will travel to places unrelated to the designated play space, and often show up weeks later despite the most vigorous cleanup. However, my definition of messy play is a little different. And a lot messier.

More Mess Is Better Mess

It's well accepted that sensory play is important for children's development, yet it often seems to be narrowly defined as hands-only, tactile experiences. I say, why stop at the wrist?

The brain learns best from experiences provided by the entire body, so I recommend whole-body messy play whenever possible. For instance, painting with your toes instead of your fingers gives you a whole new way to express yourself. Or try making mud prints with your elbows! When a child's body is fully immersed in play, sensory receptors in the skin complement all her other senses to develop a full picture of the world and

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the self. And while messy play molds the brain, it's doing a whole lot more, too.

Fine Motor Messiness

How can a child understand "clean" if she doesn't understand "messy"?

Think about the last time you held a blob of play dough in your hands. Chances are, you couldn't put it down—you squeezed it, shaped it, poked holes in it, pressed it through your fingers, and so on.

Messy play is a call to action for the fingers, working those tiny muscles to build strength, endurance, and coordination. This development, together with core and upper body development, helps young hands learn to manipulate a crayon, pencil, pen, or keyboard, as well as piano keys, guitar strings, and more.

Cleanliness Is Next to Messiness

What does "clean" feel like? As an adult, you might say, "Clean is when my hands don't feel sticky, gooey, gravelly, or chalky; when there is no dirt on my skin or under my fingernails; when my hands smell of nothing; when I feel comfortable touching something precious or white or shaking someone's hand." In other words, "clean" is "not messy."

Consider this. How can a child understand "clean" if she doesn't understand "messy"?

Messy Mania

Messiness is one thing. But put "messy" in the same sentence with "mania" and that's where most adults draw the line. I say, "In for a penny, in for a pound." Getting messy is a license to get even messier. And when "messier" happens, messy mania kicks in—an exuberant freedom from everyday expectations of conformity and neatness.

In and of itself, this is a great emotional release for kids, but it's also a boundary buster where children learn what it feels like to go beyond where they've been before—and even across the border to "too far." After all, it's one thing to be *told* you'll get cold from snow. It's another to feel snow down your shirt.

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And as for the cleanup, let's be honest. There's not a lot of difference between cleaning up "messy" and "messier."

The Power of Mess

Creating change is an important learning experience for a young child. When she discovers she can make a difference in her world—large or small, accidental or deliberate, neat or messy—she awakens to the idea that she has the power to do things herself.

Messy play is a dramatic expression of that power, because the child sees big changes of her own making as she physically transforms herself and the space around her. And yes, the mess at the end of your mop is no fun for you. But the learning for her is worth it.

The After Mess

When a child observes or participates in the cleanup, she's learning to respect her environment. By seeing the transformation from neat to messy and then back to neat, she learns that she is part of something bigger than herself.

And that's a very neat feeling.



Gill's Notebook

Born to Be Fit

We are all born to be fit. But unlike adults, kids don't work out. They play out!

For little ones, fitness should only be measured in giggles because playing naturally maintains fitness. Just compare what you do at the gym to what a kid can fit into her average day and you might want to think about doing a few more reps.

Adults Work Out	Kids Play Out
Warm up	Wake up, stretch out, wiggle out of bed
The gym	The playground
The chin-up bar	The monkey bars
Situps	Swinging
Push-ups	Wheelbarrow races
Resistance training	Tug-of-war ("Mine. No, mine!")
Free weights	Building blocks
Stair climber	"Race you to the top!"
Treadmill	"Race you to the door!"
Rowing machine	Rocking horse
Cardio	Skipping rope
Aerobics	Tag
Anaerobics	The hokey pokey
Exercise ball	Any ball
Cross-training	Skipping
Circuit training	Homemade obstacle course
Spin class	Biking
Reps and sets	"Again! Again!"
Glutes, abs, and thighs	Galloping on a hobbyhorse
Tai chi	Roughhousing
Yoga	Looking at books upside down
Stretching	Reaching for the cookie jar
Juice bar	Juice box
Cooldown	Bedtime stories and good-night kisses



M Is for Monkey Bars

Fine Motor Development: A Job for the Whole Body

A child's hands are powerful learning tools. With her hands, a child can control the world around her, build and create what she imagines, and express herself—first with gestures, then with scribbles, and eventually with pictures and written words.

Parents and teachers know the importance of fine motor control—especially when it comes to handwriting. That's probably why they frequently ask me for advice on this subject.

Here's what I say: Put your pencils down and go play on the monkey bars.

The Natural Order of Motor Control

A child's understanding of her body and her muscle control and coordination develop in a natural, orderly way—from the top down and from the inside out. It starts at the head and works toward the toes while building out from the torso to the arms and legs.

This order of priority, established by the brain, ensures that the large muscles necessary for coordination and locomotion are well developed first. They can then support the complex mastery of the small muscles. The hands alone have more than 60 muscles, dozens of bones, and hundreds of ligaments and tendons.

So you see, on the developmental timeline, the hands (and feet) come last.

What Are Fine Motor Skills?

This doesn't mean that a child's hands aren't active as she grows. Very young hands begin moving with simple, reflexive, whole-hand grasping. Over time, early reflexes release and the pincer grip kicks in, letting the child use her forefinger and thumb in unison. Each day, more deliberate hand and finger movements emerge.

But none of these movements are fine motor skills yet. Fine motor refers to the highly precise, controlled, almost imperceptible movements necessary to do detailed work, such as using a pencil to write. But even writing isn't all fine motor skills. In fact, it involves much of the body:

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- The core muscles hold the body in an upright position.
- The shoulder muscles bear the arm's weight and rotate freely to position the arm.
- The upper arm holds the weight of the lower arm and hand, delivering the hand to the page.
- The lower arm provides the fulcrum on which the wrist rotates.
- The wrist holds the hand steady and rotates to the appropriate position.
- The fingers fold around the pencil, which the thumb holds in place.
- Together, all five fingers place the pencil at the correct angle to meet the page, press down and maintain the right amount of pressure to leave a mark, and make tiny left, right, up, and down movements across the page.

If any of these muscles don't do their job, writing will be very hard indeed. This is whole-body learning, and it brings us full circle back to the monkey bars.

Climbing, hanging, swinging, and other high-energy activities that build strength in the upper body and core muscles are vital to developing fine motor skills. Twisting, turning, dangling, and swinging develop flexibility and agility in the shoulders, elbows, wrists, and fingers. Pushing, pulling, tugging, and lifting build strength and an intuitive understanding of simple physics such as weight, pressure, and resistance.

Messy play, too, is ideal for building strength and dexterity in the hand and finger muscles. Play dough, sand, water, mud, and other tactile materials provide sensory experiences for the brain and hands and might even mean neater handwriting someday.



Gill's Notebook

Making Every Word Count

When it comes to young children, not all words are created equal. That's why I like to tell parents and teachers to pack their words full of calories for children to chew on. Here's what I mean.

Specificity: Use Nutritious Language

Young children have a tough enough time working out one word from the next, so my first rule of thumb is: *Think in specifics*. Be as literal as you can. For instance, when presented with a child's painting, saying "That's beautiful" might make him feel good, but it won't give him more information about his painting. Instead, be specific with your praise: "I like the way you used yellow to create that circle." Now his understanding of yellow and circles is more complete.

Variety: Use Many Different Words

No matter where you are, take time to point out the rich details that surround you. For instance, in the garden there are lots of different flowers, so take a word tour. "This is a daisy. See how the petals are white?" Use simple comparisons: "This is a flower, too. It's called a rose. See how the petals are red?" Use lots of different words in many different ways to help those words sink in.

Personalization: Make It Meaningful

Experience has more learning punch when it has personal meaning. Get down on the floor with the child so the learning is at his level, and stay close through the experience so you are sharing it together. Use the child's name to make it about him, and relate it to things he already knows. And of course, let him get his hands into the learning while you narrate the action.

Be a Good Verbal Model

Model proper pronunciation and grammar. The child won't know the difference, but he will imitate you.



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Use Context

Select words that you can use in different contexts, so the child will learn that words can have multiple meanings. (We'll discuss this more in Chapter 16.)

Make It a Conversation

Show him how much fun words are. Invite discussion. Stay open to questions. And whenever you can, let the child teach you. After all, nothing's more empowering than a listener interested in what you have to say.

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Learning Left and Right

Almost by osmosis, and with no formal training, young children acquire simultaneous command of multiple directional concepts. Through interacting with their world and hearing words to describe it, they piece things together pretty well all by themselves. And that's remarkable, because directional reasoning is pretty tricky stuff.

Learning left from right would be a snap if everyone's left were your left and everyone's right were your right. But of course, that's not always the case. Left and right depend on which way you're facing (orientation) in relation to others (directional reasoning). Ask two children to face each other and raise their right hand. *Right* is not on the same side. "My right" and "your right" are two different things. Yet both are right (and correct) . . . for now. Have those same two children stand in front of the mirror and raise their right hand, and *right* is now on the same side. "My right is your right."

Let's face it. That's just plain confusing.

The concepts of left and right actually require advanced directional reasoning. That's probably why they take a long time (or a lifetime) to master. So here's how I handled teaching left and right when I was an early childhood teacher:

For the first 10-week term of the school year, I would focus on the concept of *left*. When a child earned a sticker, I put it on his left hand or foot. When children wanted to participate or ask a question, I had them raise their left hand. I had them write their names on the left side of their paper, stand to the left of me, jump to the left, shake hands with their left hand, and so on.

And I constantly reinforced the concept with the word. "I'm putting this sticker on your *left* hand. You did a good job of writing your name



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on the *left* side of your paper.” In other words, I employed the principle:
Experience + Language = Understanding.

And when the kids returned from vacation for the next term, we’d do the same, only on the right.

Over time, and with lots of practice, left and right became firm, fixed concepts. And with those foundations, the children were then ready to apply left and right to other things, such as putting their left shoe on their left foot.

Gill's Notebook

Learning on the Move

I often get this question: "I understand how important movement is. But what if it's raining outside?"

Some adults have adopted the notion that movement is an outdoor activity and that "real" learning only happens indoors.

To help parents and teachers get beyond this indoor/outdoor bias, I suggest trying Motorvators. You've already seen these sprinkled throughout the book. They're quick movement "snacks" for use anytime, anywhere throughout the day, and yes, indoors or out.

Motorvators are great for transitions or just shaking things up a bit and providing some "motorvation" for kids and grown-ups alike.

Start by introducing one Motorvator at a time and sticking with it for a day or more. Multiple chances to practice give children time to develop confidence with the activity. Once children have mastered it, they often begin to improvise. When that happens, it's probably time to try another Motorvator. Here are 10 quick Motorvators to get you started.

Bunny Hopping

Two-footed jumping is an important prerequisite for more advanced physical skills, such as hopping on one foot or leaping forward. Two-footed jumping develops strong leg muscles and physical confidence. And of course, it's a chance to defy gravity right in the middle of the day!

Caterpillar Creeping

Start by having the children get on all fours. Have them walk their hands out in front of them, leaving their knees in place. Then have them walk their knees toward their hands. This is a terrific activity for building coordination, because it moves one part of the body while the other stays still. It's tricky at first, so give the children time to practice. If you keep at it, by the end of the day most kids should have it down!



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Seal Crawling

Have the children lie on their tummies and wriggle their way across the room without using their arms or legs. You want them to use their core muscles—and their funny bones. And don't forget to bark like a seal!

Crab Walking

Start in a sitting position on the floor. Have the children lean back on their hands and lift their bottoms, supporting their bodies on their hands and feet. Have them walk forward (or backward for more advanced play). This is a tough one for children lacking upper-body strength, which is critical for school-day stamina, so watch to see if anyone tires easily. They may need more time building their strength.

Leapfrogging

For this activity, organize the children in groups of two to four and have them leapfrog over one another to get from place to place throughout the day. This activity not only provides a quick high-energy burst, it also requires teamwork. Who goes first is usually the first thing they need to work out. Try not to step in unless negotiations get confused or heated.

Masking Tape Maze

Run masking tape in different directions all over the floor to create different lines and shapes for all kinds of learning activities. As a quick Motorvator, have the children transition from one activity to the next by walking on the lines. When they get good at that, have them try walking heel-to-toe on the lines. For even more challenge, have them try walking backward on the lines.

Spot the Spots

Cut out different-colored spots and tape them around the room—on the floor, the walls, the furniture, and so on. When it's transition time, call out a color and have the children make their way from spot to spot, using that color only, to get where they're going.

Beanbag Balance

Give each child a beanbag and have him balance it on his head during transitions. This will slow the children down a bit and give them great practice in controlled movement and spatial awareness. Once they've

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mastered walking, have them stoop down and touch the floor without dropping the beanbags.

Under and Over

During each transition, have the children climb under something (a desk, a chair, each other) to get where they're going. On another day, have them climb over something. Reinforce directional language by using the words *under* and *over*.

Choo-Choo!

For each transition, have the children form a line to create a choo-choo train. Appoint a new engineer each time, so everyone gets a chance to decide which way to steer the train.



Gill's Notebook

Count the Giggles

In today's achievement-obsessed world, kindergarten is the new first grade, preschool or preK is the new kindergarten, and who knows where toddlerhood is headed. More and more children are losing precious free playtime to well-intentioned "enrichment" classes and other structured experiences intended to provide children the best possible start in life.

Now, many adults claim remarkable learning results from these classes. And many say the structure provides other benefits, such as learning to follow directions, socializing with other children, or simply being exposed to new ideas. And that's all well and good, except for one thing: Play does all of these things better.

Play comes from within. It doesn't need anyone else telling the child what to do or how to do it. It only needs the child.

Play is immediate. It meets a child's needs right here and right now, speeding up or slowing down on command. Play has no pickup time.

Play respects a child's choices because it knows his needs from the inside out. The rest of us are pretty much just guessing.

Play gives the imagination somewhere to go. Imagination is nature's way of helping a child interpret and experiment with life. It shapes his world vision and defines his point of view. At play, a child is in control of what's real and what's important.

Play is flow. At play, a child is free to set, change, and achieve his own goals without judgment. Self-satisfaction is his report card.

There's just one problem. The immeasurable benefits of play are not measurable. You can't take its temperature to see if it's working. It doesn't provide progress reports, and you can't compare it to the kid next door.



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And for some, that's just not good enough. So for those who need data points, here's what you can measure:

- Count the giggles. How many times a day does he laugh out loud?
- Count the quiet moments when he's so engrossed, he forgets to go to the bathroom.
- Count how many stories he tells about space aliens, pirates, princes and princesses, elves and fairies, robots, puppies and kitties, and a big hairy monster named Lou who hangs out in his closet.

And when you've finished counting, consider this: Play produces children capable of pure joy, deep reasoning, and ideas nobody's ever thought of.

And by any measure, that's a start in life worthy of our children.

My Little Hero—How Kids Learn Responsibility

Taking Charge

Little ones often think size means power. After all, grown-ups are big, and they seem to think they can tell children what to do.

When a child plays with avatars, suddenly she's the biggest being in that world. She finds out how it feels to be in charge. And she discovers that, as Spider-Man says, "With great power comes great responsibility."

Avatars put children in the role of fixing and tending to things, just as they see parents, caregivers, and teachers do. Children aspire to become the heroes they see in us every day—the ones who respond to need. The central theme of most avatar play is caregiving—from feeding baby dolls to gassing up toy trucks, from defeating bad guys to kissing frog princes. In short, avatars let children figure out how to make everything right with the world.

Boys and Girls

Around the time children begin avatar play, you may start seeing what looks like gender-based choices. And it seems to come out of nowhere. I've had many parents swear to me that they provide a balanced, nongendered selection of toys and don't allow television or computer time.

Still, their sons choose trucks and army guys, and their daughters gravitate to dolls and tea sets.

Not all children gravitate to what looks like gender-based play, but many do. Are these choices hardwired or environmental? I wish I could tell you I know the answer but I don't. Instead, here's what I believe.

In the early years, a child's play choices have little—maybe nothing—to do with gender and everything to do with social and emotional needs. Because avatars give all the power to children, they are ideal for this kind



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of exploration of self. Any meaning adults may ascribe to a child's choice of doll or action figure, magic wand or light saber, princess carriage or Batmobile misses the point. Avatar play is all the same play: to tend, fix, care for, nourish, rescue, solve, defend. In short, to make better the lives of others.

And in my view, when children are reaching for these values this early in life, something really right is going on, no matter what they pick out of the toybox.

Nourishing and Caretaking

"It's time for my baby's bottle."

—Suki, 2½ years old

"Gas 'er up and check the tires."

—Jack, 2 years old

Rescuing and Healing

"Here, have some medicine. It will make you feel better."

—Jacob, 3½ years old, to his teddy bear Pancake

"There's a fire on East Street. Don't worry! Fireman Milly is on the way!"

—Milly, 3½ years old

Defending and Restoring Order

"The wicked witch couldn't hurt anyone anymore, and they all lived happily ever after."

—Becky, 4 years old

"Pow! Zam! Oomph! Take that, Riddler. That'll teach you to rob little old ladies!"

—Marco, 4 years old

By shrinking the world to fit in the palms of their hands, children can work out complex emotional concepts in a manageable way. When a child plays with avatars, suddenly she's the biggest being in that world. She finds out how it feels to be in charge.

Gill's Notebook

When the Score Doesn't Matter

Today there are so many wonderful programs to introduce young children to sports. From itty-bitty soccer teams to gymnastics, swimming, tennis, and so much more, children are being exposed to sports and sport techniques at a very young age. And in my view, that's all great so long as three things are firmly in place:

1. The child is having *fun*.
2. The child is getting a *variety* of physical experiences.
3. Any notion of judgment or competition (winning/losing, succeeding/failing) is kept *off* the playing field.

The Fun Imperative

Now, the good news is that many programs recognize, honor, and respect what I call "the fun imperative." These programs put the emphasis where it needs to be: on participation, exploration, experimentation, effort, and joy. However, from time to time I run into a grown-up who seems to have something else in mind (or simply forgets what fun looks like).

For instance, a while back I was with my granddaughter at her "nastics" class. At three, she is bright, loving, smart as a whip, and fully uncoordinated.

As I was sitting and watching her bumble off the 3-inch balance beam four times in five steps, I overheard a mom nearby telling a friend that she wasn't going to sign up her son for another term. "He's not very good at this," she admitted. I looked across the gym and spotted her little boy who was bumbling around the gym, too. But, like my granddaughter, the look of determination on his little face spoke volumes. Sure, by adult standards, he wasn't very good. But then you've got to ask yourself, who needs standards when you're that little and trying that hard? (Besides, who needs the lessons more, the kid who's good at it, or the kid who isn't?)



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Variety Matters

Sometimes sports are all a child wants to do. And while I respect and encourage that kind of enthusiasm, research shows that children with a well-rounded background in physical movement are better prepared to specialize later on.

And then there's the burnout factor. Young children who push themselves (or are pushed) into competitive sports too early may well be the ones who burn out early, too.

The Competition No-No

For little ones, being measured or compared on their physical performance can have lasting, negative effects. Beyond demoralizing the child with a premature concept of failure, or pinching his pride, introducing competition too early (especially physical competition) might serve to inhibit what *needs* to be the free and freeing use of his body for his overall development. And I'm not just talking about his physical development. You see, little ones are tangible learners. Any dent in the child's confidence to use his body in ways that feel natural to him may impact his view of his abilities in other areas as well, including how he approaches learning.

Gill's Notebook

Happy Endings

My granddaughter Caitlin and I were playing together one afternoon. I had to take a conference call, so I stepped away for a few minutes, leaving her happily playing princess in the living room.

When I returned, I asked her what had happened while I was gone. She didn't answer me. I asked again. Still no answer.

Then I realized she wasn't in my living room anymore. She'd transported herself to an imaginary world.

Deep in Play Means Deep in Learning

Play is the most important thing a child can do to expand her mind, body, and sense of self. Play gets the body up and moving and the imagination out and exploring.

When a child enters into a deep state of play, she's in charge of what's real and what's important. Time stands still as she makes her own discoveries and draws her own conclusions. In those moments of creation and decision making, she lays down the foundations for future learning—she's learning *how* to learn.

For a child deep in play, the "real" world melts away in favor of her own, far more vibrant and, yes, *real* reality. Anything that tries to interrupt (like nosy grannies) gets filtered out.

Interrupting Play

In my view, we should strive to give children opportunities for deep play as often and for as long as possible. But sometimes we must interrupt the play, and that can be tricky. The more deeply engrossed a child is in what she's doing, the bigger the fuss will be.

In hopes of helping you navigate the tantrum-filled waters of "It's time to stop," here are some of my favorite strategies for creating happy endings.

Distraction. A few minutes of distraction are often all you need for a smooth transition. For instance, if she loves fairies, be sure to have a magic wand in the closet in case you need to create an instant fairy moment. In short, always have something fun up your sleeve.

Preparedness. When playing a game, establish ground rules for stopping play *before* you begin. For younger children, set a timer. When it sounds,

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the game is done. For older children, establish the number of turns each child gets and have them count the turns.

Near the end of the game, advise the kids that the end is approaching. "Time's up soon" or "Two more turns each" is often enough to forego the fuss.

What next? When you can, offer choices for the next activity. For little ones, it's best to offer just a couple of options: "When we finish our game, you can have a snack, or we can read a story. Which would you like to do?" Be sure to honor the child's choice.

For older children, it's a good idea to get them to think stopping is their idea. You could say, "I wonder what we'll do after we finish this game?" Discuss the options and make sure it's a real conversation and collaboration.

The big finish. Play should always end on a high note. But once in a while, an activity will drag on too long. If you sense this, create a big finish.

Kids will follow your emotional lead, so ramp up the energy with your voice and actions. Add intensity to the last minutes of the game. Speed it up. Add a silly twist. Create a big finish! "Ta-da! Hooray! You did it!"

Celebration. Be sure to celebrate the play afterward. Encourage the child to retell the tales of her play. Listen intently. Ask questions. Explore it fully. Have her reenact it for you or draw a picture of it.

Post-play celebrations reinforce the concepts explored during play, and your interest will encourage her to play and explore even more. And that's what I call a happy ending!