

PLAY BUILDS HEALTHY BRAINS AND RELATIONSHIPS

BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

We all love to play, but did you know play is essential for learning and developing new skills that support many areas of our lives? And, for children this is really important.

Why play is important for children

Play is an important part of a child's life. Not just because it is fun, but because it is critical for their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development – in other words, play is important for healthy child development.

Play is incredibly valuable for children of all ages. In addition to supporting their development, it also helps them build and maintain positive relationships with those caring for them.

What about children who have experienced trauma?

Children who have experienced trauma may not have had the opportunity or safety to play and be curious about their world. This can then affect their development not just as a child but as they become an adult. This is because they may not have developed the skills and knowledge that are the foundation for becoming healthy, mature adults.

Benefits of play

There are many benefits of play, including:

- > support healthy brain development
- > provide relaxation and reduce stress
- > help them feel loved, happy and safe
- > learn how to interact with others and the world around them
- > develop and master skills through exploration
- > develop leadership and learn cooperation
- > practice adult roles
- > gain independence and self-reliance
- > overcome fears, build confidence, self-esteem and resilience
- > improve communication, problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation, sharing, compromise, self-expression and advocacy skills
- > discover and pursue areas of interest
- > promote creativity, goal-setting, empathy and social interaction.

The role of carers

It is important for carers to encourage and provide opportunities for play to happen that is safe and supportive. This is time children and carers can have fun together and help the child heal, also called 'relational healing'. Relational healing is the idea that trauma that happens in the context of a relationship, needs to also be healed in the context of a relationship. For carers, this means being available, taking notice, commenting, connecting before correcting, providing encouragement and helping children manage strong emotions.

Play needs to be child-driven

Children's play belongs to children. Carers should allow children to make the rules – except when it comes to safety. Play can involve other children or be alone. Carers can join in, if they're invited. Carers can *guide* play by providing resources, space and their time, but children need to be given creative *freedom* to explore and pursue their passions. This gives carers a glimpse into the child's world, perspectives, needs, strengths and competencies. It also helps build a lasting relationship as it tells the child you are present, interested in them and they are important to you.



Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > Kids Matter: Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative: Children learn through play
- > Ginsburg, K.R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting health child development and maintain strong parent-child bonds. *American Academy of Paediatrics*. Vol 119. Number 1.
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- > Source images: Freepik.com (brgfx)



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