

CORNELL HUMAN ECOLOGY
BRONFENBRENNER CENTER FOR
TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The Parenting Project:

Healthy Children, Families, & Communities



Parent-Child Interaction through the Lens of Play and Generational Shifts in Parenting

Family Strengthening and Support Training Institute
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June 10, 2025



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The Parenting Project: Healthy Children, Families & Communities

- Intro and my role
- [The Parenting Project:
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& Communities](#)

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My Work on Play

- Teaching/Research in Scandinavia
- OMEP
- Journal of SEL
- Op-Ed
- Research on Play

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Overview

- ✓ Developmental Benefits
- ✓ Contexts
- ✓ Research
 - ✓ Parental Beliefs
 - ✓ Play vs. school readiness
- ✓ Decline in Play
- ✓ Tips for Parents and Parent Educators
- ✓ Q&A



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The Power of Play

The American Academy of Pediatrics Rx: “Play with your child every day.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages that pediatricians write prescriptions for play at well child visits



Research demonstrates that play with parents and peers builds important academic and social skills

Social-emotional

Cognitive

Language

Self-regulation

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Play + Child Development

- Play offers children a sense of control, allowing them to explore their interests in an unhurried and relaxed manner
- Various types of play, including playing with parents, engage a child's mind and allow space for creativity and discovery
- Play builds the more creative, curious, and problem-solving areas of the brain known as executive function skills
- These skills help a child self-regulate and control their own behavior

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Play + Child Development

- Play is neurorestorative to a brain affected with stress
- Developmentally appropriate play meets the child where they are and reminds the young brain that the world can feel manageable and secure, allowing the nervous system to calm

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Contexts of Play

The Nordic Model of Play

[Video](#)

Free play

Outdoor play

Guided by the child and supported by a pedagogue

Classic developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky theorized that children learn through play

However, looking at play from a comparative perspective (play and learning in Scandinavian countries and play and learning in the U.S.) presents disparate pictures

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Play is a Fundamental Human Right

The United Nations (UN) [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) has enshrined the right to engage in play that is appropriate to the age of the child (Article 31)



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Play as a Fundamental Human Right

- The CRC is the most ratified international human rights treaty to date
- Since its adoption in 1989, 196 countries have ratified the CRC, committing to protect children from violence and exploitation, and ensure their education and healthy development
- The United States is the only country in the world that **has not yet ratified the treaty**
- As ratification of the convention has become nearly universal, the U.S. opposition leaves other countries baffled and undermines U.S. global initiatives to support children

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International Day of Play

Wednesday, June 11, 2025, is
[International Day of Play](#)

This year the theme is “Choose play – every day!”

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Parents + Play

Play is an opportunity for parents to engage with their children:

- Observe and understand nonverbal behavior
- Participate in serve and return exchanges

Fosters children’s curiosity

Develops self-regulation skills

Facilitates language development

Encourages imagination

Promotes dyadic and reciprocal interactions that are crucial for healthy social relationships

New research demonstrates that a mother’s interactions with her child can shape how the child plays with other children

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Research on Play: Toddlers

Children learn through hands-on play

- Toddlers who spend more time building jigsaw puzzles have stronger spatial skills as preschoolers than toddlers who do not
- Toddlers who create more object constructions later have a larger vocabulary for locative terms (e.g. “in”)
- Pre-K children who play linear board games show gains in early math skills

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Electronic Toys

Play with electronic toys reduces caregiver-child communication relative to play with blocks and books

Yet, children from low-income homes spend more time with sound-producing toys than their higher-income peers

- Infants from low-income homes also engage in less object play

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Parental Beliefs about Play: Toddlers

We explored the relation among parental beliefs about child learning, their toy preferences, and their education and socio-economic status (SES)

To assess parental beliefs of child learning and play, we surveyed parents ($N = 339$) of children 2 to 5 years of age via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on their views about toys and child learning



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Which toys would you pick to play with your child?

Definitely yes 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Definitely not



VTech Little Apps Tablet



Wooden Blocks



Play food & shopping basket



Play Smart Phone



Number & Counting Matching Pairs

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Parental Beliefs about Play: Toddlers

Results from the survey demonstrate a clear distinction between play and school readiness:

- Parents who rated allowing their child time to play as important also rated play with a parent, puzzles, blocks, readings, arts and crafts, outdoor play, unguided play, and play with other children as *important*, and use of tablets and video watching as *significantly unimportant*

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Parental Beliefs about Play and their Choice of Toys

In a second study, we recruited 32 families and their toddler or Pre-K child

Parents chose among several toys and were videotaped playing with their child for 10 minutes

Parents then completed portions of the MTurk Survey and engaged in an interview



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Parental Beliefs about Play and their Choice of Toys

Most parents selected a combination of traditional toys and electronic toys

- Typically, two traditional toys and one electronic toy

In contrast, their survey responses reflected much stronger preferences in toy types

- No relation between their rating of toys as preferable and the types of toys they chose for play with their child

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Parental Beliefs about Play and their Choice of Toys

Parents' ratings of the traditional toys were highly correlated to each other

- Their ratings of the electronic toys were related to each other as well

Parents' ratings of the traditional toys were unrelated to their ratings of the electronic toys

- Parents differed in their preferences for each type of toy

Parents who did not endorse electronic toys as a toy for play with their child had children with higher vocabulary scores

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Parenting Tips for Play and Child Learning

- Children learn through play
- Difference between learning through play and learning through school-readiness activities
- Parents show a preference for non-electronic toys when talking about play and electronic toys when engaging their child in school-readiness activities
- Parental beliefs about the importance of play impact amount of time for play, type of play (with parents, outdoor), and selection of toys (puzzles, blocks, etc.)

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Research on Play: Infants

- Infants learn through hands-on play
- Infants learn through exploring objects
 - Linked to understanding of objects and understanding of others' goals
 - Interventions of object play linked to advances in infant learning
 - Play with blocks promotes spatial perception in 8-month-old infants
 - Parent-infant object play enhances infant attention

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Parental Beliefs about Play: Infants

The goal of the project was to document parents' play with their infants and the play materials parents select with their infants

Across the duration of the 3-year project, we recruited first-time mothers to engage in play with their infants aged 8 to 24 months

In the first year of the project, we piloted home visits, conducted over Zoom because in-person data collection was not possible during the pandemic

We adapted the study to be conducted remotely, via Zoom, and all families participated in their homes

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Parental Beliefs about Play: Infants

In the final year of the project, we focused on recruiting families from rural communities and including infants in the older age range of 18 to 24 months

Mothers were filmed playing with their child for 10 minutes with play materials currently in the home

Following the play session, the experimenter interviewed the mother about their infants' play materials

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Parental Beliefs about Play: Infants

Mothers were asked to identify which play materials (including non-toys, such as Tupperware) their infants enjoy and use most and invited to share their views of which activities or play experiences may be ideal for promoting infant learning and development

Mothers also complete the MCDI-Level I language development inventory as a measure of their infants' receptive language

To conclude, mothers were invited to share their views of which activities or play experiences may be ideal for infant learning and development

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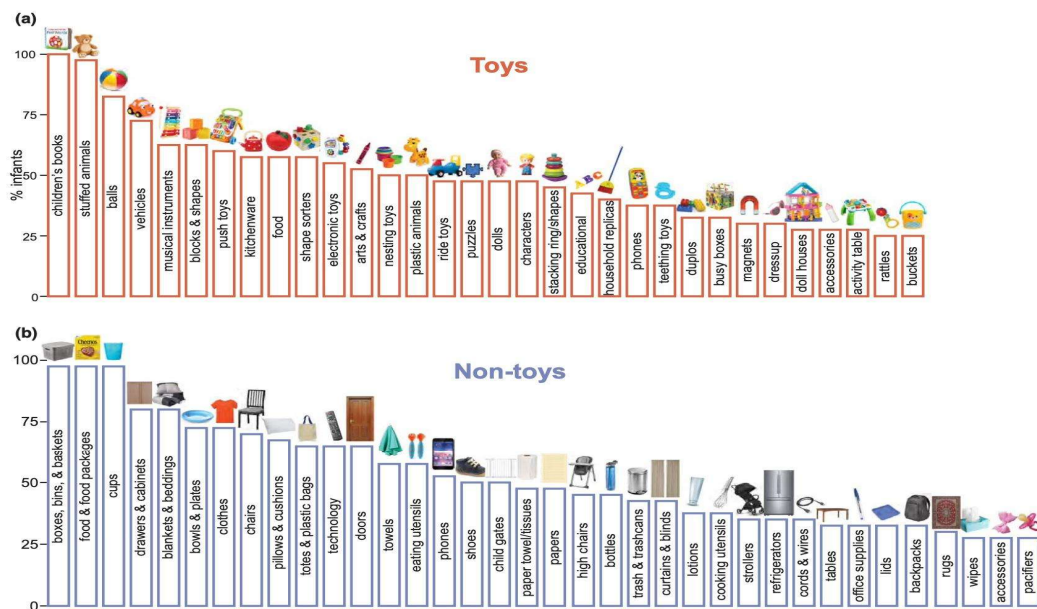


FIGURE 6 Variety of objects in infant play. (a) Toys and (b) non-toys that at least 25% of infants interacted with across the two home visits

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Parental Beliefs about Play: Infants

Currently we are...

Coding parent-child interactions and transcribing the interviews for qualitative analysis to identify common themes for parental selections of infant toys

Coding toys used in the play session

Behavioral coding for contact attempts with toys made by infants and the types of toys that infants touched

Language transcription (Whisper AI) of parent speech in infant-parent interactions

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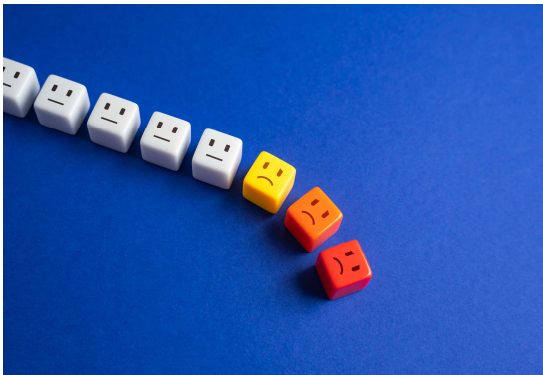
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Decline in Play

A significant decline in play, especially outdoor play



INCREASED
SCREEN TIME



SAFETY
CONCERNS



STRUCTURED
ACTIVITIES



OVER-
SCHEDULING



FOCUS ON
ACADEMICS

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Implications

Compared to a generation ago, children are spending more time on their phones and less on exploring and taking risks, which allows children to learn and become independent

As play has gradually decreased, anxiety, depression, and suicide rates among school-aged children have increased

We cannot say definitively that there is a causal relationship but there are *both* theoretical and empirical reasons for believing a relationship exists between children not playing and exploring and doing things independently, and the increase in rates of anxiety, depression, unhappiness and lacking in resilience

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What can you do in your work with parents and families?

- Explain the research to inform parents of the benefits of play for children's development and well being
- Support the implementation of policies in schools (e.g., play bill) to ensure children have time to play
- Advocate for communities to enable more opportunities and safe spaces for play
- Governor Hochul's Unplug and Play Initiative

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What can parents do to increase children's play time?

- Parents cite exhaustion and inability for affordable alternatives as reasons for screen time use—explore alternatives to screens such as arranging play with other children, outdoor play, play with wooden toys, blocks, etc.
- Parent education and training are key to minimizing, or avoiding screen time in children younger than two years

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Parenting Styles and Generational Shifts in Parenting

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Parenting Styles Research

- In the 1960s, psychologist Diana Baumrind, considered a pioneer of research into parenting styles, identified three main styles of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative and permissive
- Baumrind suggested that
 - Authoritarian parents try to shape, control, and evaluate their children's behavior based on the absolute set of standards
 - Permissive parents are warmer and more autonomy granting than controlling
 - Authoritative parenting falls between these two extremes

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Parenting Styles Research

- In the 1980s, a fourth style, neglectful, was added by Stanford researchers Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin
- Based on the combination of two dimensions – demandingness and responsiveness – they defined four parenting styles: authoritative (i.e., high demandingness and high responsiveness); authoritarian (i.e., high demandingness and low responsiveness); indulgent (i.e., low demandingness and high responsiveness); and neglectful (i.e., low demandingness and low responsiveness)
- Based on Maccoby and Martin's work, Baumrind expanded her typology with a fourth parenting style, namely the 'neglectful' parenting style.

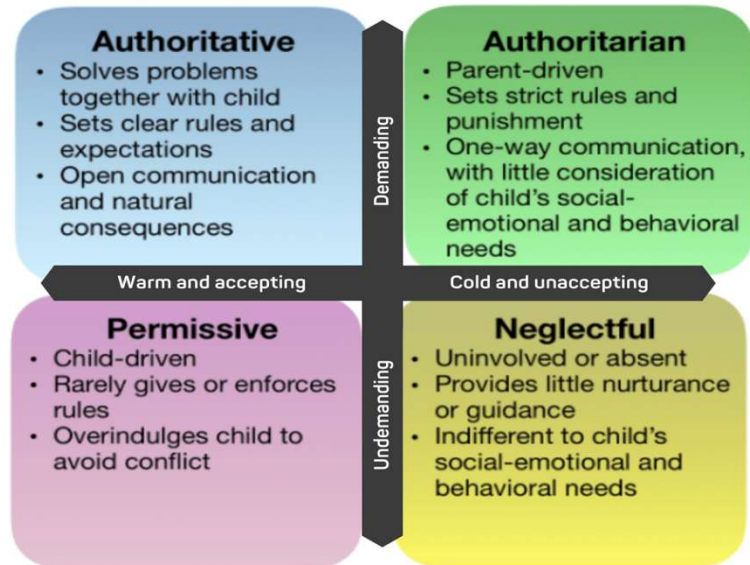
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Parenting Styles



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Generational Shifts in Parenting

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Parenting Styles + Generations: Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers (Born 1946 to 1964)

- ✓ Parents of late Gen Xers and Millennials
- ✓ Boomers value high educational standards (college was a priority) and high standards of living
- ✓ Prioritize structured play that directly contributes to academic or cognitive development such as educational games
- ✓ Actively participate in and guide children's play, often setting rules or structures for play
- ✓ Adhere to traditional parenting and less open to new or unconventional approaches to play
- ✓ Boomer parenting may help explain why Gen X was one of the first generations of parents to move away from a more authoritarian parenting style and lean towards learning about the best ways to parent

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Parenting Styles + Generations: Gen X

Generation X (Born 1965 to 1980)

- ✓ Gen X'ers are known as helicopter parents, a parenting style where the parent is excessively present in the child's life, hovering over all that they do
- ✓ Gen X parents seek a balance between structured activities and opportunities for free play and exploration
- ✓ Prioritize play that promotes social skills, emotional expression, and creativity
- ✓ Gen X were raised largely by Boomer parents who were less involved parents when Gen X were children
- ✓ This could help explain why Gen X parents prefer to be more involved and present in their children's lives

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Parenting Styles + Generations: Millennials

Millennials (Born 1981 to 1996)

- ✓ As many Millennials are children of Gen Xers and the helicopter parenting style, they tend to have a more flexible approach to parenting than they were raised with
- ✓ They are more empathetic and curious about their children than Gen X, and are drawn to the conscious parenting style
 - ✓ Seeks to model behavior to children so they mirror parents' actions
 - ✓ This parenting style has created the next generation of more self-aware children—those who will become Gen-Z parents in the next coming decade
- ✓ Millennials parent similarly to GenX and are also more receptive to different forms of play, including online gaming and technology-based play

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Parenting Styles + Generations: Millennials

Millennials (Born 1981 to 1996)

- ✓ Social media and technology shape how they parent:
 - ✓ As much as 80% of parents of young children rely on social media for parenting advice
- ✓ Millennial parents also rely on technology, both in learning about how to parent and in allowing screentime for their children
 - ✓ Downside is having to impose limits on screen time for their children
- ✓ They also may have been overscheduled and prefer not to overschedule their children
- ✓ Another component of Millennial parenting is teaching individualism and work ethic over more traditional values

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Parenting Styles + Generations: Gen Z

Generation Z (Born 1997 to 2013)

- ✓ Gen Z parents are more likely to use the gentle parenting style approach which encourages parents to understand their child's emotions and perspectives, even if they are frustrated
- ✓ They value personal expression and are inclined to reject traditional norms which leads them to explore new parenting styles
- ✓ They encourage children to explore their own interests and express themselves freely, even if it means deviating from traditional play patterns and are open to a wide range of play activities, including technology-based play
- ✓ Children of Gen Z may be psychologically healthier because these parents tend to prioritize their child's mental health and well-being

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Parenting Styles + Generations: Gen Z

Generation Z (Born 1997 to 2013)

- ✓ Gen Z grew up in the age of social media where everything is recorded and shared and every aspect of life is critiqued
- ✓ They feel pressure because of this environment which allows social comparison to other parents' 'perfect' lives portrayed on social media
- ✓ Because Gen Z only knows parenting within the context of social media, technology and extreme interconnectedness, they value allowing exploration of identity more so than work ethic as compared to Millennial parents
- ✓ However, some Gen Z are still in middle-school, so there's still a lot to learn about how this generation's parenting!

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Q&A

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Thank you!

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