

# 8 summer activities to promote kids' healthy development during COVID-19

July 14 2020, by Penny Pexman, Lorraine Reggin and Sheri Madigan

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With daycare and school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have taken on more responsibility for children's learning and development and for many this has been a major [source of stress](#). The

pandemic and the challenges of learning from home have definitely taken a toll on parents [and children](#)!

Parents and children are [also grappling with cancelled sports, camps, and activities this summer](#), or [reduced-capacity daycare centres](#). Parents typically rely on these activity and care options to keep kids busy, and parents' time scheduled. This means unscheduled months ahead. Some parents undoubtedly will continue to struggle with finding ways to occupy their children.

We suggest whenever possible parents embrace the summer months as a time to encourage or participate in play.

Play can have [real and measurable benefits for both children and parents](#) because play nurtures the stable relationships and connections that kids need to thrive. And, when children and parents experience joy and shared communication together in play—what researchers call "attunement," based on harmonious back-and-forth or "[serve and return](#)" interactions—this serves to regulate the body's stress responses.

Playful activities can enhance children's learning and development, and can also help make up for lost academic time due to COVID-19. Playful activities involve choice, active engagement and moments of joy or delight.

## Play for foundational learning

Children's [academic skills](#)—counting, recognizing letters, learning words and reading—are important and foundational for their school success. Yet in the absence of formal schooling, research shows that many of these abilities can be enhanced with a playful approach. For example, children who use numbers in their play (for example, a [board game](#) with number sequences and counting) tend to show [stronger mathematics](#)

[knowledge and interest](#). In addition, children who get to explore and interact with lots of everyday objects [tend to learn more words](#).

Play with objects, and pretend play with objects, are both important learning opportunities for children and are related to their later language and reading development. Children actually [understand stories better when they act them out with toys](#).

Puzzle play and play with construction-type toys (such as blocks or boxes) can support children's math and [spatial reasoning skills](#), or their abilities to recognize patterns and shapes. In sum, this more sensorimotor perspective on learning is important and something that parents could embrace in the COVID-19 context.

## Healthy child development

When children have choice in their play activities, they can learn how those choices make them feel. In the process, they may develop important skills like managing their frustration. Maintaining focus on an activity is also a skill and one that children develop with practice. Research shows that children are more likely to engage in a task that they choose themselves and that [they perceive as play](#).

Pretend play, involving imaginary characters and themes, can be particularly important for children's developing [social skills, attention and their abilities to be aware of others' thoughts and feelings](#). This pandemic summer offers a chance for children to spend more time in these important imaginary or fantasy-themed play activities, both with parents and with siblings or by themselves.

## Benefits of nature

During warm summer months, taking play activities outside may be particularly beneficial, for both children and for parents. Outdoor spaces provide new objects to interact with and new forms of the natural world to marvel at such as animals, insects, trees and sky.

The outdoors provides space for the physical play that is important to children's motor development and to adults' physical health. Beyond that, however, research suggests that time spent in nature restores our ability to [think clearly](#), [improves mood and reduces anxiety](#).

## Activities for learning through play

### Outdoors:

- Take a bike ride with the goal of finding certain numbers or letters on signs. Plan your route using a map and if appropriate, kids can calculate distance and speed or simply time segments of the trip.
- Go for a walk in a park or forest, counting or naming logs, insects, birds or big rocks. There are many [outdoor scavenger hunt ideas](#) available online. If you have access to a nearby pond or river spend some time throwing or skipping rocks.
- Map out streets in beach or playground sand. Recreate routes to your favourite places. Or you could try [geocaching](#)—using orienteering skills to find hidden boxes. Take out a prize and leave a new one.

### Indoors:

- Using some combination of toys and blocks, create a toy parade, battle or themed party. For example, in your living room or snaking through multiple rooms, you can set up castles, towers or

a tea party.

- Play board games or puzzles: These can teach reading, math, logic, turn-taking and social skills. A few ideas include classics like Snakes and Ladders, Monopoly, Trouble, Mancala or newer games such as Blokus, Ticket to Ride and Carcassonne (Junior version or 7+ version).
- Art and creative sorting and sensory projects: Keep cardboard boxes, tubes, and envelopes and give children access to paper, glue, scissors, markers, pens, crayons and colourful items such as buttons, paper clips, ribbons or pipe cleaners. Let kids choose what they would like to create. They will probably surprise you!
- Read riddles or I-spy books filled with hidden objects, or read aloud in a specially created "book nest" of blankets and pillows. Reading aloud is beneficial for little kids and big kids. You can also use car rides as an opportunity to listen to recorded books, available either through your local library or a subscription service (ideas include [Roald Dahl's BFG](#), Virginia Hamilton's [Time Pieces: The Book of Time](#), Gary Paulsen's [Hatchet](#), Jason Reynolds' [As Brave As You](#), [Beverley Cleary's Ramona](#), or classics [like The Hobbit](#)). There are many free podcasts capturing kids' interests on a variety of subjects, for instance [NPR's Circle Round](#).
- Encourage a passion: If your child has always wanted to learn how to sew, carve, design a game or build a Lego world, then this is their time to enjoy those unique passions.

Finally, the benefits of play extend to parents too. When parents find moments to pursue fun and joyful activities, they relieve their own anxiety and model for their [children](#) the important relationship between playful behaviour and health and well-being.

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## Provided by The Conversation

Citation: 8 summer activities to promote kids' healthy development during COVID-19 (2020, July 14) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-summer-kids-healthy-covid-.html>

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