

# Building tomorrow's leaders through play

By [Kristian Imhof](#)

20 Feb 2020

Children are naturally wired with a desire to play - where adults might see a simple cardboard box, a child envisions an exciting new fantasy world where anything is possible. Spending time creating these realms of possibility in their minds is how children develop their ability to be creative and, ironically, to think outside of the box.



By simply having the freedom to play, whether it's on their own, in a group of their peers or together with their families, children are not just having fun, but learning new skills and making huge strides in their physical, cognitive and emotional development. This lays the foundation for the careers they will one day choose, the types of interests they will develop, and the kind of adults they will grow up to be.

It's the simple, instinctive act of playing that opens a new world of opportunity to children, boosting their potential and allowing them to build the skills they need to thrive in the future.

## The state of play

As digital technology advances, so has the landscape of play as we know it, making it a far more dynamic and overlapping experience that brings the real world, imaginary play and digital experiences [together as one](#).

Children today are more inclined toward digital play, while the current generation of parents still prefer physical activity like sport and 'rough and tumble' play. Interestingly, children still want their parents and caregivers to play with them – even if it is digital-based play like streaming a TV show or playing a game app on a tablet.



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This has resulted in a shift in play – parents are [incorporating technology into games and playtime with their children](#) and agree – despite a belief that all that screen time is anything but healthy – that digital play can be creative and rewarding for children, and a way to bring families closer together.

## Playing to learn

Play is incredibly important in a child's development and journey of learning, and playing together as a family is just as crucial for building stronger family ties.

In the first 18 months of life, children start to build fine motor skills, learn how to communicate with others and start to formulate basic emotional responses. If you observe a child engaged in play experiences playing with Lego Duplo bricks, you'll likely notice patterns of repetition – this is how a child learns new ways to approach a task, experimenting with what works best to achieve the desired result, while developing their hand-eye co-ordination in the process.

Having the freedom to play breeds creativity and encourages a sense of curiosity, while specific focus areas like 'constructive play' gives children a goal to work towards and a sense of progress and achievement as they go. Parents say that construction toys help to stimulate their child's imagination and discover new things while playing, helping both the child and parent to be more creative and have fun as a family.



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If you've ever seen your little one pick up an imaginary phone and animatedly rattle out a gibberish conversation, or squawk along with the hareda birds each morning, you may have noticed how they learn through mimicry and observation. Along with being incredibly adorable to watch, it's also indicative of the fact that adults have an important role to play in a child's cognitive and behavioural development.

With these vital skills in place, a child is able to develop other more complex skills, such as creativity, empathy, independent thought, and problem solving – many of which are vital in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM), and are increasingly in high demand in the workplace.

## Play makes a better world

Experts in child education and development around the world acknowledge the need for children to learn skills that prepare them for the ever-changing and increasingly complex future world of work.

Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, echoes the sentiment from a governmental level. "The ability to generate innovative and workable ideas together with flexibility and creative problem-solving is one of the most sought-after skills for hiring in the 21st century. Creativity is a determinant for personal, academic and professional success in this changing world," she says in a 2019 report.



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While today's adults may not feel prepared or even knowledgeable enough to understand the need to foster these skills in their children, it's the power of play – from free play to play that's guided by a parent or educator – that can assist children in growing in these important areas.

“All children are born eager to explore, experiment, and create using whatever is available to them. It's more important than ever that we, as adults, nurture that curiosity by providing ample opportunities for children to experiment and to try out new and creative ideas – both in and out of school,” says Bo Stjerne Thomsen, Head of the Lego Foundation Centre for Creativity, Play and Learning.

Play has the power to teach us valuable lessons, to turn a child's imagination into a fulfilling career, and to unite families by creating opportunities to learn, laugh and grow together.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristian Inhof, Country Manager for The Lego® Group in South Africa

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