

Empowering Children and Parents Through Play

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Play is a body and mind process that promotes the healthy development of children. It is the way children learn about themselves, the people around them, the world they live in, and how things work in their world. Play happens everywhere, even under stressful situations.

Juega Conmigo is a program that applies concepts of play and human development to promote positive parent-child relationships and optimal child development. *Juega Conmigo* empowers parents to play an active role in their child's play. When children receive the right level of support and guidance during play, learning happens in a fun way.

Play is different from other activities, because it is:

- Pleasurable: if it is not fun, it is not play
- Voluntary
- Oriented to the process not the ends
- Free of externally-imposed rules
- Physically and mentally engaging
- Non-literal, it is flexible and creative

Children's foundation for learning is built during free play as well as guided play:

- Free play: Self-motivated play where no specific goals are set by adults and includes free exploration.
- Guided play: Adult's goal to expand child's exploration and teach concepts, following the child's agenda.

Why is play important?

Play is beneficial for both children and parents:

- Promotes healthy brain development
- Enriches positive, responsive parent-child interactions
- Increases successful language development
- Enhances self-control and executive function skills
- Promotes social and emotional competence

- Builds motor skills
- Reduces stress
- Boosts energy

Play is a common language for children and adults. Play allows adults to be at a child's level.

In the *Juega Conmigo* (Play With Me) program, children ages 0-3, together with their parents, engage in playful-learning activities, guided conversations for the parents, free play, and semi-structured music and movement activities.

Methods used in *Juega Conmigo*

- Education: information about the importance of play to children's development and learning
- Modeling: facilitators model playful interactions with the children for the parents
- Practice: routines include free and guided playtimes
- Observation & Feedback: facilitators observe children and parents' play and offer suggestions and feedback for optimal play and interactions

Recommendations for Parents

- Establish regular play times
- Create appropriate spaces for play
- Give undivided attention during playtime
- Always be at the child's level
- Embrace repetition
- Allow the child to be the leader in play
- Don't force play or try to prolong it

Recommendations for Professionals

- Don't make assumptions about children and parent's needs
- Ask questions
- Step out of your comfort zone
- Create environments that are safe and age-appropriate
- Don't be afraid to use play as an informal tool to assess children's development and skills

Resources

David Elkind. (2007). *The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children*. Da Capo Press.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., Berk, L., & Singer, D. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Presenting the evidence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kenneth Ginsburg, MD. (2007). *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*. American Academy of Pediatrics.