



Deborah MacNamara, PhD

CLINICAL COUNSELLOR • EDUCATOR • WRITER

[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [COUNSELLING](#) [PRESENTATIONS](#) [KID'S BEST BET](#) [EVENTS](#) [CONTACT](#)

From Play to Personhood

[Attachment](#) | [Play](#) | [Preschoolers](#)

"All work and no play make Jack a very dull boy"

(James Howell, Proverbs in English)

What is the role of play in children's lives and why would we want to make room for it? Play is often seen as free time that is spent without care and work. They formed some of my happiest memories as a child and I can still see my swing-set that took me on journeys beyond my backyard.

Moments spent in play are a luxury and are only present when the relational needs of a child are being met.

These times are critical for brain development as it is when children form neural networks that are involved in later problem solving and creativity. Research on children who lack environments that foster play, have brains that are 20 to 30% less developed in capacity. Play is not empty time; it is how children build the brains that are required for work and learning.

All play is not created equal; it's not about the toys, the stimulation, and the entertainment. The type of play children need is where there is expression and exploration coming from within them to construct, build, create – it is not a passive activity. This type of play is called emergent play and in this state you see curiosity, imagination and sense of discovery in full action.

My husband would often groan coming home from work to find the bathroom transformed into a swimming pool for dolls, craft sparkles that defied capture from one end of the house to the other, and an overall mess created from hours of play. I would remind him that he shouldn't look at it purely as a mess but rather the imaginings of the teacher, designer, and scientist that lurked within my children. The force of their play continues to this day to outmatch our need to walk on a clean floor.



Emergent play does not typically unfold from activities with a lot of structure and rules, as this tends to confine and take the lead in terms of play. This is not to suggest

that we stop these activities but it does mean that we need to stay cognizant that structured activities are not equal to free play. In grade one my daughter informed her gym teacher that she wasn't interested in joining his running club because she simply had enough activities and just wanted to play.

Children who have a lot of stimulation from the TV or computer may report being bored away from these sources because their emergent play and energy has been stifled, subdued or overpowered. For these golden play times to emerge we need to do our part and ensure their relational needs are taken care of, provide the necessary materials, and a space free of stimulation. When these conditions are met, we can sit back and watch their imaginings take hold. We can be rest assured that it is not just child's play; it is creating the brains that will solve the problems of tomorrow.

Copyright Deborah MacNamara, PhD, Kid's Best Bet - *Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a counsellor in private practice and on faculty at the Neufeld Institute. She works with parents, educators, child-care and mental health professionals in making sense of kids from the inside out. See www.macnamara.ca or www.neufeldinstitute.com for more information.*

SHARE

**DEBORAH
MACNAMARA, PHD**

*Faculty, Neufeld
Institute*

*Clinical Counsellor,
Private Practice*

*deborah@macnamara.ca
(604) 802-1377*

**COUNSELLING
OFFICE**

*West Side Family Place
2nd Floor*

*2819 West 11th Avenue
Vancouver, BC Canada
V6K 2M2*

NEWSLETTER

Email address:

SEARCH

