

Section 3: Game ideas for encouraging play

- Using a bathtub, sink, or outdoor water source, **challenge your child to build a vessel** that will float out of recycle materials like popsicle sticks, milk cartons, cans, and so on. Younger children can test different materials for how well they float and hold water.
- **Make drums and shakers** out of materials like buckets, cans, beans, et cetera.
- **Draw your family** on the sidewalk in chalk.
- See how tall you can build **a tower of blocks**.
- **Model your neighbourhood** using blocks, pine cones, or any materials available.
- **Set up a domino course or obstacle course**. For example, try to guide a marble through a course made up of many different materials.
- **Have a paper airplane contest**.
- **Set up a tent** in the house in the winter or in the yard in the summer.
- **Build an obstacle course** for children to run or crawl through. A small group of children can easily build their own course and run through it on their own terms.
- Freeze milk cartons and plastic buckets of water in the winter to be used in **snow fort construction**. Food colouring can be added for extra design points. Forts can also be decorated afterwards using spray bottles filled with coloured water. If you can, use a food colouring that will wash out of clothes easily.



Tips for outdoors

What is free play?

Free play is when a child uses their mind and body to explore and have fun. Play is “unstructured” and may be done with or without friends and family, indoors and outdoors, and with or without toys. Free play is a time when children feel in control of the activity.

Why is free play important?

Free play helps a child’s physical and mental development. Creativity, cooperation, and independence are all learned through free play. Young children use play as a way to experiment with the world and practice moving in different ways. Older children often act out roles and scenarios they have seen. Free play gives children a chance to learn through their own interests and imaginations without being limited to a curriculum or schedule.

Why do we need to increase free play?

Many families replace time for free play with time in front of computer, gaming, or television screens and scheduled activities like ballet or soccer. This means children spend less time discovering the world by themselves or following their natural interests. Because more parents are worried about safety and prefer their children indoors where they can be supervised, children do not have a chance to be physically active or get to know their own neighbourhood. Promoting free play allows children to do what they do best – play!

In your yard:

- Keep some space in your yard clear for children to **run, jump, and roll**. If you are designing a space from scratch, consider slopes and dips in the landscape to increase curiosity and imagination.
- Access to **hoses and sprinklers** should also be permitted and encouraged. Parents can provide guidelines for safe use and care of these devices.
- Incorporating many **natural elements** to the play space such as rocks, pebbles, pinecones, sand, grass and water also provide extended opportunities for play.
- Consider your space from each child’s perspective, as well as what will be appealing as a child grows. **Natural elements are less likely to outgrow your child than store bought toys**. For example, a hammock is a welcome swing for family members of all ages, where as a plastic slide may be outgrown quickly.

In your neighbourhood:

- Make time to **visit local playgrounds and parks**. Public spaces don’t need slides and swings to be interesting- forests, ponds, and fields make great play places!
- **Set age-appropriate boundaries** in the neighbourhood as children grow, such as the end of the block, or the route to a friend’s house
- Children need space to test their abilities and stretch their bodies. **Places to climb and balance** make great play areas. Surfaces that demand strength, balance, and coordination are also important for a play environment.
- Supply a magnifying glass, bug catching net, binoculars, small shovel and bucket to **help children discover their environment more intimately**

In **cold climates** encouraging outdoor play may seem more challenging, but smartly dressed children will enjoy playing outdoors in cool temperatures just as much as in warmer weather. **Try to pick fabrics that will not get in the way of play**. Water resistant mittens, face masks which do not freeze up and are ventilated, and sweat-wicking under layers that do not itch will be appreciated by your children and allow them to maximize their play time and ability.

If you can, **shovel driveway snow into one large pile** instead of small piles along the drive. The extra effort will be rewarded as children climb and tunnel through the end result.

Tips for indoors

Section 2 : Creating a child-friendly environment

Things to play with:

Consider **providing play materials that can be used in different ways**.


- Encourage toys like blocks, cars, puppets, cookware, dolls, and dress up clothes like hats, shoes, vests, dresses, or glasses can be **used by different ages of children in many different ways**.
- Place an **old mattress** or thick blanket in the middle of a room to jump and tumble on.
- Make markings on the floor using removable tape. **Children will invent many different games** and movements along and over any sort of markings, for example, boxes or zig zags.
- Allow the use of **chairs and blankets for forts**.
- **Save recyclable materials** like paper rolls and popsicle sticks for crafts.
- **Designate one couch as the play couch** that children can remove pillows from and play on. With a little imagination, a couch can quickly become a bus, ship, castle, and so on.
- **Larger recycled materials like big boxes and wrapping paper rolls** can keep kids occupied for hours!

Making play possible:

- Allow a space and time for **messy crafts**.
- Make a **gallery wall** as a space to display artwork.
- **Keep toys at heights where children can access them** without parental assistance.
- Provide some indoor space for children to **run and jump** without hurting themselves or breaking other objects.
- Children playing alone do not have to be alone. Some children prefer to **play in areas where other family members are visible**, like a corner of the kitchen.
- Try to **provide toys that will challenge children as they develop**. For example, providing puzzles with and without knobs will encourage further skills as children become ready.
- **Establish rules** about where children can and cannot play in the home. Parents may feel more comfortable decreasing supervision once they know they can trust their child.

What can parents do to increase free play?

Parents can provide opportunities to increase the amount of free play their children engage in. The following manual was designed for parents to help increase their children's free play.



Section 1 helps parents create a time and space for children to play, stop boredom, and play with their children.

Section 2 provides suggestions for creating a child-friendly environment indoors and outdoors.

Section 3 includes a list of games and activities that can help get a child's imagination started. These ideas will help parents step back and watch as their child's imagination takes over, grows, and develops with unstructured free play.

Section 1: Promoting play

Creating a time and place for play

- Allow children uninterrupted time of **45-60 minutes** to just play.
- **Do not over-schedule** or exhaust your child with structured activities.
- Do not worry about dirty clothes or objects that can be cleaned. **Put aside 'play clothes' for messy activities.**
- **Get to know your neighbours.** Neighbours can provide playmates, and increase supervision outside.
- **Encourage play dates with friends** so that your child learns to play with different kinds and numbers of children.
- If they are old enough, **allow children to be a part of designing the play space.** Children who help decide where toys will be stored are more likely to use them and more likely to put them away.
- **Limit computer, gaming device, and television time,** forcing children to create their own fun and games.
- **Establish a routine,** such as always playing outside with neighbours after school. Children will become accustomed to having a set time for their own play.

Fighting boredom

- If children become bored with their usual games, **model play behaviour** by playing with them and perhaps testing some of the play suggestions listed in this manual.
- Purchase **toys that can be used in different ways** to extend interest. For example, blocks can be used many ways, but a pink Barbie jeep may be more limited.
- **Bring out an older toy** that may have been forgotten.
- **Supply unusual objects** like old boxes to play in.
- **Read to your children,** trying different voices for each character. They will be more likely to create their own stories and imitate the characters they read about.
- **Move objects around** to keep ideas flowing. For example, drag the playhouse to a new location for a day, or pull the couch out a foot to make a passage.
- **Make a list together** of fun games to play and activities to do. For example, "play with play-doh, play tag, build a fort, set up an obstacle course", etc. When kids don't know what to do, you can help them decide from their list which may inspire even more ideas.

Parental involvement

- **Do not force your involvement** if children are playing happily by themselves. If your child asks to play with you, do not change the direction of the game or try to restructure the existing creativity. Try to go along with their ideas and rules.
- **Set a timer** for needy kids. For example, explain, "I need 25 minutes to make a phone call. Try playing with (cars, blocks, etc.) while I do this". Hopefully they become so engaged they do not notice when you finish. Do not say what will happen once you are off the phone.
- **Share games** you remember from your own childhood with your children and their friends if they become bored.
- **Reward your child's play.** For example, say, "Wow you guys are so creative! Looks like you were having a lot of fun out there! What a great idea to _____!"
- If your child spent all day at daycare, **do not expect them to play alone** again once at home. Young children will try to involve a parent they see little of during the day, and will benefit from parents joining in play and suggesting activities.