

## **The Importance of Unstructured Play**

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Over the past three years since the onset of COVID-19, there has been a notable transformation in the way children engage in play, particularly within our playground. Play, in its diverse forms, not only brings joy and entertainment but also plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's development. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the landscape of play, with restrictions on social gatherings impacting traditional group games and physical activities. However, even amidst these changes, the importance of play in childhood development remains unwavering.

From infancy to adolescence, children progress through various stages of play, each stage offering distinct learning opportunities. It's important to recognize that not all children develop and reach milestones at the same time; individual differences exist, and each child may traverse these stages at their own pace. Whether it's sensorimotor play in infancy or complex social games in adolescence, play evolves alongside cognitive, social, and emotional development. Through play, children cultivate crucial skills like problem-solving, cooperation, and creativity, while also using it as a platform to explore emotions, develop social skills, and build resilience.

While structured play has its benefits, unstructured play or free play is equally essential. Allowing children the freedom to direct their play fosters spontaneity and imagination, enabling them to explore, experiment, and create on their terms. This form of play encourages independence, resilience, and a sense of agency in their learning journey. It's important to acknowledge that playground scuffles are a natural part of children's social development. These conflicts, while sometimes challenging, present valuable learning opportunities. They

teach children conflict resolution skills, empathy, and negotiation, essential for navigating social interactions throughout life. As staff and parents, it's crucial to monitor and moderate these interactions, guiding children towards constructive resolutions while fostering independence and resilience. Furthermore, playground scuffles shouldn't always be perceived as negative incidents but rather as moments for growth and understanding. By reframing these experiences as learning opportunities, we empower children to develop crucial social skills and emotional intelligence.

There is also a growing concern about the increasing prevalence of solitary, screen-based activities, which may limit social interaction and imaginative play. While technology offers educational resources and entertainment, it's crucial to strike a balance between digital and traditional forms of play for holistic development. In all its manifestations, play remains fundamental to childhood, offering boundless opportunities for learning, growth, and exploration. As partners in your child's education, we encourage you to support play at home by providing diverse play materials and opportunities for exploration. By limiting screen time, promoting outdoor play, and nurturing imaginative activities, we enrich the play environment and contribute to children's holistic development.

At St. Columba's, we deeply understand the profound impact of play on our students' growth and well-being. That's why play has been prioritized in our annual action plan. Recognizing the significance of play and its impact on a child's development, we are dedicated to creating a supportive environment where children can engage in diverse forms of play while receiving guidance and encouragement from staff. By nurturing a rich play environment, we aim to equip our children with the tools they require to thrive in the future.