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PLAY **BY AGI PLENK, PH.D.**

Where does your child play -- playground, day care, church, home? Does your child play with other children – older, same age, younger, siblings? Does your child like to play alone? Do you play with your child daily? Do other family members? Do you enjoy playing with your child?

What is your child's favorite toy – blocks, cars, trucks, puzzles, picture books, dolls? Does your child play with the same toy all of the time? How does your child play – constructing, destructing, crashing, throwing? Does your child like to play with play dough, paints, other creative materials?

There are lots of theories about the meaning of playing, alone or with other children and adults: Play's principal function is adaptive. Pioneers in early childhood development, Freud and Piaget, believed that children play to gain mastery of experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. Erikson, another pioneer in early childhood development, saw play as social adaptation, having trial and error experiences in learning to cope with life tasks.

The quality of a child's play is determined by things such as the levels of anxiety and self confidence. Play may have minimal activity or lots, be observant or participative, messy, experimental, exploratory. The child may have a short attention span or be focused. Children need to have permission to try different things, to see "What can I do by myself?" It is not important that the blocks fall but that the child meets his or her own expectations, not those of the parent. Children progress to playing in parallel next to other children then begin to interact and cooperate in play with other children.

Did anybody play with you when you were little? Do you remember playing with a toy you picked, which might have been an empty cottage cheese container with a hole in it, or blocks of different colors and shapes? What were your favorite toys? Who played with you? Did you have fun?

Do you remember playing with one of your parents or an older sibling? Did they tell you how to shape play dough or build a tower? Or could you experiment and knock down the tower and laugh? You might reexperience your memories, or if you don't have any, recreate them with your children. Board games and projects are great with older children – but nothing helps a child to develop self-confidence, dare to try, feel proud, and have fun more than time with another child or adult and picking a toy and seeing what she or he can do with it.

What toys does your child pick? Big boxes, small boxes, books, stuffed animals – what does your child do with it? What is success? Be generous with your praise (please mean it). When your child presents you with a picture, describe what you see to him or her and save it to show off.

What matters is that you observe your child, relax, enjoy, and really see the little person – you may see someone different than you had known.