

learning is child's play

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The message that the first few years of life are extremely important for brain development has become more widely known. What may be less clear is how to put this knowledge into practise. Parents wanting to give their pēpi the best start are faced with a huge variety of choice and much commercially-driven pressure to ensure that their child makes the most of this developmental opportunity. The bewildering number of toys and activities currently available for our babies and young children is enough to send parents' stress levels sky-high. And that's before the credit card bill arrives!

Tamariki need stimulation but, as with many things, moderation is key. More is not necessarily better. Many tamariki today are at risk of being over-stimulated or over-scheduled and this can actually delay rather than encourage their brain development.¹

During the first years of a child's life it is play and 'ordinary life' that contributes the most to brain development.² We don't need to formally "teach" our young children in order for them to learn. Tamariki have their own interests and by being supported to follow these they are likely to be getting the stimulation that they need.

Play provides a wonderful opportunity for parent and tamaiti to have fun together, deepening their relationship. Tamariki also need opportunities for some play on their own, as this provides many opportunities to develop their imagination, learn to problem-solve and develop other skills which they may not practise in adult-directed play. Boredom is not all bad either. At times, boredom may provide the impetus for a child to make their own discoveries and create their own fun, fantastic life skills and great stimulation for a growing brain.

It's the simple things

Simple, maybe even 'old-fashioned' toys that allow tamariki to use their imagination and creativity have many benefits over the endless plastic creations currently available.³ Blocks, water, a sandpit, versatile dress-ups (maybe parents' old clothes as opposed to Disney inspired ones), crayons and paper provide endless options. Household objects such as boxes, blankets, pots and pans can also provide many hours of fun and learning. The things that offer the most stimulation for a growing brain don't usually have the "educational" label on them.

1. Fancourt, 2000
2. Frost, 1998
3. Ginsburg, 2007



Real world fun

Learning and brain development is not limited to toys and activities specifically created for children. Tamariki have been playing and learning long before the invention of modern toys! Following children's interests in the real world provides many play opportunities too. Household activities that we usually consider work are rich with opportunities for learning, and play. Hanging out the washing, baking, grocery shopping and weeding the garden provide many opportunities for exploration and learning - and while the task will take longer with children involved, it can be much more fun for the adult, too.

Everyday life is full of naturally occurring learning opportunities.⁴ Watching the rubbish truck, road works, rain going down the drain, or a rainbow, can capture the interest of a child when shared with a parent. Take time to stop, observe, and talk with your tamariki about the things happening around them, and, when possible, move on only when your child's interest is waning. Be confident in the knowledge that you have just provided them with the stimulation they need, and it didn't cost a cent!

Using their senses

Nature is full of rich sensory experiences that are so vital for healthy brain development.⁵ Playing with the sand at the beach, feeling the bark on trees, smelling flowers, or listening to birds singing - enjoyed with loving whānau - all provide stimulation prompting brain connections to form. Sensory experiences can be messy and tamariki benefit from being able to enjoy such experiences fully, without anyone worrying about the washing!



Despite all the advertising claims, media use and electronic toys are no match for the benefits of hands-on play with real world objects.⁶ Tamariki use their senses; touching, tasting, smelling, listening and looking at the real world, and this is how their brain learns. Nothing can replace the value of whānau joining their tamariki in play, and viewing the world through their eyes. Where possible children really benefit from enjoying another person's full attention.⁷

Conclusion

Playful, creative tamariki who have had plenty of unscheduled, non-screen (TV, phone, tablet) time for play throughout their early years, are more likely to arrive at school with their natural curiosity intact, a strong desire to learn and healthy social-emotional skills.⁸ This will benefit them more than those whose infancy and pre-school years have been filled with scheduled activities and little time for play.

Playing, and having fun with adults and other children, is, quite literally, brain-building.⁹

Glossary of Māori terms:

Pēpi – baby, infant
Tamariki – child
Tamariki – children
Whānau – extended family

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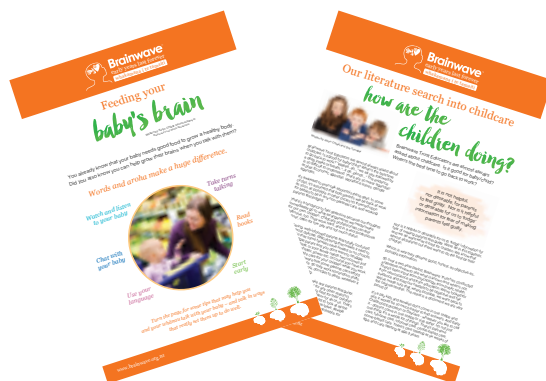
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4. Yogman et al., 2018

5. Kuo et al., 2019

6. Healey & Mendelsohn, 2019

7. Milteer et al., 2012

8. Szalavitz & Perry, 2010

9. Yogman et al., 2018