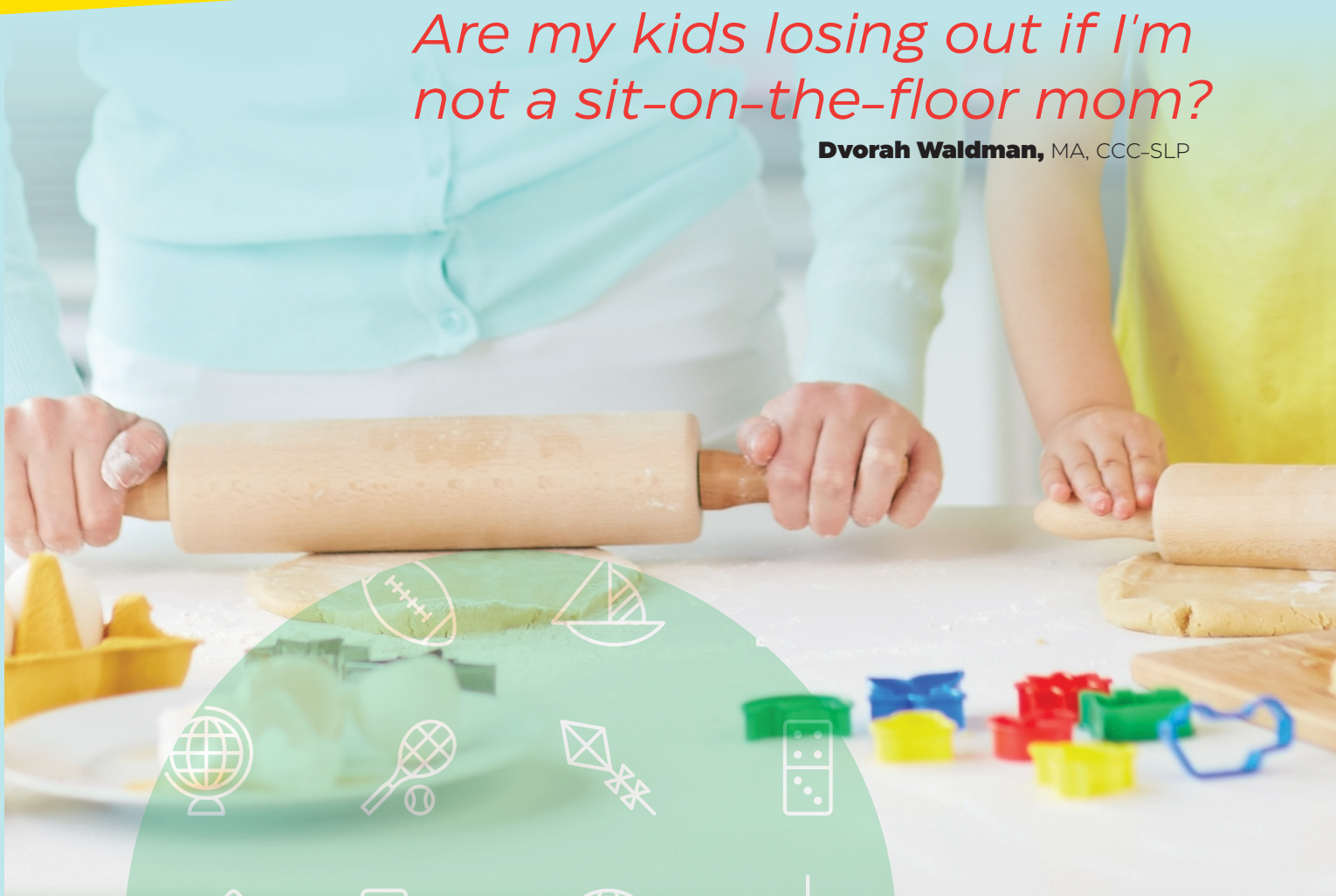


# More Than Child's Play

*Are my kids losing out if I'm not a sit-on-the-floor mom?*

**Dvorah Waldman, MA, CCC-SLP**



**B**abies grab their toes and laugh when Mommy plays peekaboo. Toddlers reenact circle time with a class full of stuffed animals. Preschoolers don a police hat and chase the bad guys. Elementary school-aged children fiercely debate the minutiae of each stage in a game of “kugs.”

In short, play is what kids do.

Since it's fun and enjoyable, it's easy to look at play as a luxury or as a break after the serious business of learning — the dessert after the spinach, so to speak. But did you know that play is essential for your child's brain development?

You name a brain skill, there's play to develop it. In fact, the learning that goes on during play far surpasses what your child will learn at school, since school learning targets only a few brain skills. Even more so, play lays a foundation for your child's school learning, because sitting in class and absorbing the high-level thinking that is imparted requires so many prerequisite skills, from the physical stamina needed to sit at a desk to language skills to the social skills needed to learn from another person

in a class full of people.

Unfortunately, in our rush to create the best schools and brightest students, play can get crowded out of the schedule. With the demands imposed on our kids by their intense schedules, too-long bus rides, and homework, play is too often relegated to second-class status. Yet the problem of too little play is even more rampant today, where screens reign supreme during kids' downtime.

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## The Serious Business of Play

Parenting expert Dr. Carrie Dendtler, PT, lists no less than ten types of play:

- 1 **Large motor play:** Activities that use “large muscles,” such as jumping and running.
- 2 **Small motor play:** Activities that use “small muscles,” like coloring and using beads.
- 3 **Rule-based play:** School-aged children excel in this, whether the rules are from a manual, as with board games, or they are just part of the childhood “mesorah,” as with the game of “kugs” mentioned above.
- 4 **Construction play:** From building toys to actually playing around with scrap wood, this type of play develops kids’ visual-spatial skills.
- 5 **Make-believe play:** Role-playing is great for perspective-taking skills. Even very young children act out their familiar daily routines, like bedtime and the Shabbos *seudah*. Besides being adorable, this is a sign that they are thriving on the structure in their lives.
- 6 **Language play:** This takes many forms, from the infant experimenting with blowing lip raspberries to your six-year-old laughing uproariously as he tries out yet another knock-knock joke.
- 7 **Art:** Kids (and adults) love to tap into their creative side.
- 8 **Sensory play:** It’s important for kids to be exposed to lots of different textures and movements in order to develop healthy sensory processing.
- 9 **Rough play:** Yup, tickling and tackling fill a sensory need for many kids — so long as it doesn’t get out of hand.
- 10 **Risk-taking play:** Our world has become both less safe and more safety conscious than in the past. Taking risks helps kids learn about judgment and cause and effect.

## Your Kid’s Most Important Playmate

Kids need lots of time to explore their world both alone and with friends, but the most important explorations will happen together with the most important person in their life: you.

*Yikes! you’re thinking. Play with my child? Not just one child, but all of them, ka’h? What about work, cooking supper, cleaning the house, doing laundry, making phone calls... Who has time to sit with their kids and just play?*

It’s way too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that just sitting and playing with your child is a waste of time. But remember, it’s not “just” play.

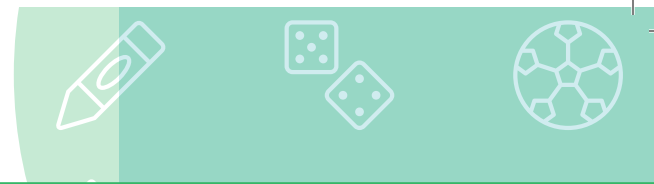
“Play is not a luxury; it’s an investment in your child’s future,” says Tzivvy Reiter, LCSW, director of Children’s & Trauma Services at Ohel. Mrs. Reiter oversees an early-childhood mental health program where therapists work with very young clients — think newborn to age three — by teaching parents to play with their child through the lens of the child’s world.

Did you know that brains are designed to develop in what Harvard Medical School child development expert Dr. Jack Shonkoff calls “an environment of relationships”? Eighty percent of brain development happens by age three, so that relationship is most crucial for very young children, but the brains of older children are still developing too.

The type of relationship that supports brain development is called “serve and return.” It’s like the continuous back-and-forth of a Ping-Pong game. Your child is constantly giving out “serves” for your attention. It’s up to you, the parent, to “return” the serve.

For example: Three-year-old Moishy says, “Look at me, Ma!” That’s the serve. You look over at his pointing finger, mirror his excitement, and say, “Wow, that’s the tallest tower I’ve ever seen!” That’s the return. Play





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The problem is that in our busy world, *interaction* too easily falls prey to *distraction*. With technology vying for our attention and work obligations creeping into our home lives, we parents can miss the serve or be too busy to send the return. That's a problem. Missing the serve on occasion isn't the end of the world, but over time, constantly missing your child's serves carries the risk of depriving them of an important connection. Brain research has actually shown that the Broca's area, the area of the brain responsible for language, is larger in kids who have had more conversational interactions in their lives!

Kids instinctively know how important connection is for them, so they'll resort to all kinds of tactics when they aren't getting it — things that we call "attention-seeking behaviors" which are in fact "*connection-seeking behaviors*."

When you play, you are entering your child's world, says Mrs. Reiter. You are letting them know that they matter. That's why play can work wonders to improve a child's behavior.

## Mutual Enjoyment

Which activities should you do with your child? Activities that *you* enjoy, says Mrs. Reiter. "Don't choose an activity that will stress you out. For example, if baking with your kids has you stressing about the mess in the kitchen, don't do it." Instead, choose something you can actually enjoy together with your kids, whether it's reading, dancing, or spending time outdoors.

Play doesn't end as your child grows; it will grow and change as your child does. By the teen years, your child will definitely have their own interests that don't include you, but they still need that serve and return from you. "For your teens, show that you care about their world," says Mrs. Reiter.

So, what are you waiting for? Get out some games, sit down with your kids, and have fun!



### Did you know?

Play in Lashon Kodesh is called "*shaashua*," from the root "*shaah*," which means "turning toward."

Play is the ultimate "turning toward." A child who is playing is fully engrossed in their activity.

When you play with your child, "turn toward" them and their world.

## Play with Your Child with **PRIDE**

The well-known therapy model Mrs. Reiter uses, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, coaches parents to connect with their kids through play. Any parent can try this at home.

When playing with your kid, think PRIDE:

**Praise:** Point out to your child what they are doing well.

*"Your picture is so colorful."*

**Reflect:** Reflect back what you see in your child.

*"You look happy/sad/angry."*

**Imitate:** Follow your child's lead.

*"Can I have a crayon too? Where should I color?"*

**Describe:** Describe what you see.

*"You made a tree, a sun, and flowers."*

**Enjoy:** Yes, enjoying your child is actually vital for their development! Children see themselves through the lens of their parents' eyes. If a parent is stressed and irritated, the child may see themselves as irritating. "Conversely, if you feel joy and delight when spending time with your child, they will see themselves through your eyes and feel worthy and loved," says Mrs. Reiter. "That is why in our busy and stressed lives, it's so important to take time to experience joy with your child. It is in these playful parenting moments that parent-child bonds are strengthened and development thrives."



## Playing with Your Child, **STAGE BY STAGE**

**Nechama Kruk, LCSW**

### 0-6 months

Your baby's best toy is... you! When you smile and coo at your baby and they smile back, you are creating positive pathways in the baby's brain. This back-and-forth play is the beginning of your baby's acquisition of social skills.

Follow baby's lead, make funny faces and noises, and watch your baby try to copy you. Even a newborn has mirror neurons and will try to mirror your facial expressions and movements. Tune in to your infant's cues; if they are fussy or lose interest, they are telling you the game is over.

### 6-12 months

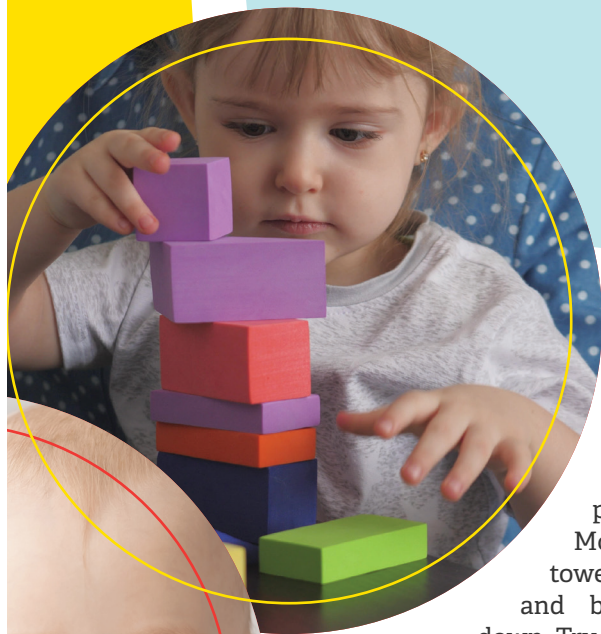
Time to introduce toys to enhance the play you have developed. Shaking toys and toys with different textures are great additions to the baby's favorite toy, you. Play peekaboo! By around six months old, babies begin to understand object permanence. It's so exciting to see Mommy's face and then, when it disappears, wait with anticipation for Mommy to uncover her face again.

### 12-24 months

Rolling a ball back and forth helps to develop back-and-forth communication and so-







cial learning. Playing with stacking toys is fun too, especially when Mommy makes a tower with blocks and baby knocks it down. Try blowing bubbles for your baby to catch, or drive toy cars together while making “vroom” sounds.

### 2-3-year-olds

This is a great time to begin to engage in pretend play together. Playing with animals while making each animal’s sound, playing with dolls and pretend food and dishes... your little munchkin will want to do everything just like you.

### 4-5-year-olds

Your preschooler is discovering more about their world each day. Pretend play is developing to a whole new level. Get creative building worlds with Magna-Tiles, Duplo, and Clics. Take out *mentchies* and let the scene come alive. Ask your child which role you should take in the play story: “Should I be the *tatty* or the little boy?”

### 6-7-year-olds

Coloring and making projects together is fun and relaxing. Playing school together, switching off taking the student and teacher role, is always a winner.



Your child may be ready for more complex building and imaginative toys like Lego and Playmobil. This creative play continues to develop social awareness and emotional expression.

### 8-9-year-olds

Your child is still super-playful, but the play is getting more sophisticated. Making skits is great for this age group. Dress up and get involved!

### 10-12-year-olds

Your preteen is discovering what they like and are good at. Does your daughter enjoy art? Baking? Does your son feel like he is good at sports? Building? Find time to make a scrapbook together, or spend time in the kitchen together decorating cookies. Go out and play a game of basketball. You may just discover your own hidden talents! 