

# FIRST 5 S H A S T A

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## **The Work of Children: PLAY!**

Young children are hard at work, exploring the world and learning as they play. Play is fun and children delight in themselves as they gain new skills through play. By providing many and varied opportunities for play, parents can have fun with their children. At the same time, they are adding to the incredible development that play stimulates in a young child's brain.

From infancy, children engage in play experiences, responding to the facial and vocal antics of parents, caregivers and siblings with first smiles and squeals of merriment. Peek-a-boo is good entertainment and this kind of repetitive, patterned activity helps speed the infant brain in making neural connections. The more these connections or "pathways" are used, the more defined they become, making it easier for the brain to navigate quickly and efficiently. As we see young children practicing and mastering new skills, we know that brain function and development are active and certainly enriched through play. Children learn to play and play to learn.

Through play, young children (particularly those under five years of age) learn about themselves and relationships with other people, including their parents. They learn to compromise, work together, and socialize through their interactions with others. As children grow, the play experience increases in complexity. Play involves the body - running, jumping, and dancing. Play involves the mind - letting the imagination rule with fantasy play. And play becomes social, particularly as children engage in free play in environments such as playgrounds.

Adventures on the playground allow children to play however they choose, supported by a wide range of structures and spaces. The Shasta Children and Families First Commission recently requested a study be completed by Duerr Evaluation Resources (Chico, CA) on current literature addressing play.\* The results of this study indicate that playgrounds can offer different types of play that are important to cognitive, emotional, physical and social development. On the playground, young children have the chance to challenge themselves physically by climbing and testing play equipment. Their knowledge, awareness and perceptions of the world and their place in it are boosted as they encounter tunnels, slides, and swings. The unique communication that occurs when children begin playing with peers lays a foundation for socializing, sharing and making friends. An outing to a playground with safe, age appropriate play structures is a fun learning experience that thrills children at each stage of their development.

New play parks and playgrounds designed specifically to meet the needs of young children are being developed across Shasta County. Projects recently funded by the Shasta Children and Families First Commission have already resulted in a new park in Cottonwood and an improved playground at the Redding Cooperative Preschool. Additional parks are still in development in Burney, the City of Shasta Lake, and Big Bend. In addition, the Shasta Commission has committed funding to a children's water play structure to be installed in the future Redding Aquatic Center.

Other outdoor summer fun is being supported by the Siskiyou Children and Families Commission. Susan Wilson, executive director of the Siskiyou Commission, is excited about the recent award of a \$25,021 grant to fund the “Wading for Summer” project. Says Susan, “Opportunities will soon be increasing for infants, toddlers, and their parents to use an improved local pool which will feature a safe wading pool and a comfortable deck area.” Young children and their families can learn about safe water practices and beat the heat while having great fun.

Another quality play environment that is available to just about everyone is the great outdoors. Denise Snider, program director for the Tehama Children & Families Commission, encourages parents to join their children in outdoor play. “The outdoors is a natural place for parents of young children to take a break from daily activities and enjoy each others company. Spending special time with children is one way parents and caregivers can get into a child’s world and give undivided attention to our most precious resource – children.”

Adventures through outdoor play can be simple, low to no cost and have limitless possibilities. For families that do not have access to parks and activities designed for children under 5, outdoor adventure might be found in their own backyard or neighborhood. Spread a blanket out and enjoy a sunny day with your child or take a walk around the block. Seek circus animals in the clouds and watch the wind whirl leaves in a mini-cyclone. Combine fresh air and physical activity for fun, learning and good health.

Child’s play – it is clearly some of the greatest work around. For the young child engaged in play, play is simply having fun. But research shows the clear link between play and brain development, motor-skills, and social capabilities. This tells us how hard children are working as they play. Children delight in play, and contributing to their play is a powerful way for parents and caregivers to facilitate good health and healthy development for these amazing works in progress.

\*You can request a free copy of the Shasta Commission’s play study results by calling 530-229-8300.

*The Shasta Children and Families First Commission , the Prop 10 Commission, was established after California voters passed Proposition 10 in 1998, adding a 50 cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs to promote early childhood development for expectant parents and children up to age five. The Shasta Commission receives approximately \$1.8 million annually in Prop 10 revenues.*