



Designed for Play

A Return to How Children are Designed to Grow

A Guide for Parents,
Professionals, & Educators



Welcome

We're so glad you're here!

The *Designed for Play* guide was inspired by a simple but powerful idea: children grow best when they are given time, space, and freedom to play. Not play that is directed, measured, or structured – but play that allows curiosity, movement, imagination, and connection to unfold naturally.

This guide is part of Prescription for Play® - a Childhood Health and Development Initiative rooted in restoring self-led, physical, outdoor play as a foundational element of childhood health, development, and well-being – honoring the way nature intended children to grow.

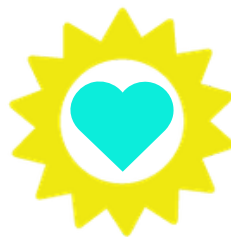
In our work with children and families, we've seen how easily play can become crowded out by busy schedules, demanding expectations, and well-intentioned efforts to help children succeed. This guide is an invitation to pause and remember that play itself is not something added after learning or behavior, but a vital part of childhood.

Within these pages, you'll find reflections meant to expand how we think about play and why it matters. We prescribe play to offer our reassurance as pediatric professionals that when children are given opportunities for self-directed, physical, and outdoor play, their growth is already being supported.

Whether you are a parent, caregiver, educator, or someone who cares deeply about children, we hope this guide helps you feel more confident protecting play as an essential part of childhood.

Thank you for being here.

Your Partners in Play,
Nicole & Dr. Hila



Play belongs at the heart of childhood.





Introduction

Play is not a luxury, a reward, or something children earn after “real work” is done. Play is a biological, developmental, and relational necessity.

The power of play lies in its simplicity – and in the way it supports how children are designed to grow.

Through play, children move, explore, imagine, build relationships, and make sense of their world. These experiences support development across physical, emotional, cognitive, sensory, and relational domains.

Today, many children spend less time in active, self-directed – and especially outdoor – play than ever before. The absence of play shows up not only in learning and behavior, but also in reduced physical health, emotional well-being, regulation, and connection.

Reclaiming play is not about adding one more activity to an already full schedule. It is about returning to what is essential to childhood.



Children spend an average of four to seven minutes outside daily.





Play and the Whole Child

Children’s bodies and minds do not develop in separate compartments. Their bodies, emotions, minds, and relationships grow together – or not at all.

Play supports the whole child by engaging multiple systems simultaneously. When children climb, run, imagine, negotiate, explore, and rest, they are not “just playing.” They are strengthening their bodies, integrating sensory input, regulating their nervous systems, building emotional resilience, and practicing social connection.

Through play, children learn how to move through the world – physically, emotionally, and relationally – with confidence and adaptability.

Play and the Whole Body

Active play supports the developing body in ways no structured program can replicate.

Through varied, self-directed movement, play supports:

- Skeletal growth and bone density
- Neuromuscular coordination and strength
- Posture, balance, and spatial awareness
- Cardiovascular and respiratory health
- Healthy & restorative sleep patterns
- Immune system function
- Metabolic health and energy regulation

Because play is dynamic and responsive, it naturally evolves in concert with a child’s developmental stage, interests, and capacity. Children intuitively seek the kinds of movement their bodies need – when the environment allows them to do so.





Play, the Nervous System, and Regulation

Play is one of the primary ways children regulate their nervous systems.

Through movement, sensory input, challenge, and recovery, children learn to navigate stress, frustration, excitement, and rest. Play provides opportunities to experience risk in manageable doses, helping children build resilience, emotional flexibility, and self-trust.

When play is reduced, children often struggle with regulation, attention, anxiety, and emotional expression – not because something is “wrong,” but because a foundational regulatory input is missing.

Play supports integration.
Integration supports regulation.
Regulation supports wellbeing.

Play and Relational Development

Play is inherently relational. Through play with others, children practice communication, cooperation, leadership, boundary-setting, empathy, negotiation, and conflict resolution. These skills are not taught explicitly – they are lived, felt, and embodied.

Through play, children learn how to be with others while still being themselves. These relational experiences form the foundation for healthy friendships, family relationships, collaboration, and community participation across the lifespan.



Nature is not a place, it's a partner in development.





Play, Oral Function, and the Developing Airway

Play is not only how children learn about the world – it is also one of the primary ways the body organizes itself for growth. Through movement, imagination, and social engagement, play supports the development of the airway, oral function, and craniofacial structures that underpin breathing, chewing and swallowing, communication, and regulation.

When children climb, run, breathe, vocalize, pretend, and explore, they engage the craniofacial–respiratory system in dynamic ways. These experiences promote postural strength, nasal breathing, and coordinated use of the lips, tongue, jaw, and face, supporting oral sensory development, speech, and respiratory control.

When opportunities for active, physical play are reduced, the body may compensate in less efficient ways. Patterns such as mouth breathing, altered tongue posture, disrupted sleep, and chronic fatigue can influence craniofacial growth, nervous system regulation, attention, and learning readiness.

From a systems-based perspective, play acts as a natural regulator – providing the sensory, motor, and respiratory input children need to rest, restore, and grow. Play is not separate from oral health or airway development; it is one of the ways these foundational systems are built, naturally and in alignment with how children are designed to grow.



Movement and play give the breath room to grow and rest.





Play and Learning

Children are designed to learn through movement, curiosity, and exploration.

Play supports:

- Executive function and flexible thinking
- Problem-solving and creativity
- Language development and storytelling
- Attention and self-directed focus
- Meaning-making and intrinsic motivation

When children are physically engaged and emotionally invested, learning becomes integrated rather than abstract. Play does not compete with learning – it is one of its most powerful foundations.

Play in a Technological World

Technology is now a central part of modern life, but it cannot replace the sensory richness of real-world experience.

Screens offer limited sensory input and often promote sedentary behavior. In contrast, play – especially outdoors – provides varied sensory stimulation, full-body movement, unpredictability, and real-time feedback from the environment and other people.

Play is not anti-technology. It is a necessary counterbalance.

By protecting space for play, we support children’s capacity to engage with technology thoughtfully, rather than becoming regulated by it.





Play and the Natural World

Outdoor play offers something uniquely powerful.

Natural environments provide varied terrain, changing conditions, open-ended materials, and rich sensory experiences that cannot be replicated indoors. Through repeated experiences outdoors, children develop curiosity, adaptability, confidence, and a felt sense of belonging to the living world.

Play in nature fosters not only physical and emotional health, but also stewardship for the environment, respect, and connection – qualities essential for the wellbeing of future generations.

Play as a Sustainable Practice

Play is accessible.

Play is sustainable.

Play is innate.

Play does not require expensive equipment, specialized training, or rigid schedules. When integrated into daily life, play supports health and well-being without adding burden or complexity.

Because play evolves across the lifespan, its benefits extend far beyond childhood – supporting lifelong movement, resilience, joy, and connection to our world.



Nature is not a place, it's a partner in development.





Why Play Matters Now, More Than Ever

As childhood becomes increasingly structured, sedentary, and screen-centered, the need to protect play has never been greater.

Play is not extra. It is foundational.

When we restore play, we support children's relationship to their bodies, to others, to nature, and to themselves. We lay foundations not only for healthier children, but for more connected families, communities, and futures.

An Invitation

Protecting play is an act of care — and of courage.

When we create space for play, we honor how children are biologically designed to grow. We choose connection over acceleration, integration over fragmentation, and wellbeing over convenience.

Play is simple.

Play is powerful.

Play is essential.





About Prescription for Play®

Prescription for Play® is a Childhood Health and Development Initiative that seeks to restore active, outdoor play as an essential foundation of childhood health, development, and well-being.

Grounded in biology, research, and lived experience, the Initiative honors play as the way children are naturally designed to grow, learn, regulate, connect, and thrive.

In a world increasingly shaped by sedentary routines, overscheduling, and technology-driven childhoods, we empower parents, caregivers, professionals, and communities to protect and prioritize play as a sustainable, lifelong human need — supporting the wellbeing of children, families, and future generations.

Prescription for Play® emerged from dialogue among pediatric health and wellness professionals, researchers, educators, caregivers, and parents to get back to what nature intended for optimal child development.



EXPLORE THE INITIATIVE!
www.prescription4play.com

