

Why Play is the Secret Sauce for Raising the Next Generation of Digital Innovators

A Special Report by

the GENIUS *of*
PLAY[™]
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It's more than play!



Playtime is evolving with the growing influence of digital technologies. Traditional play has been shrinking while screen time has been increasing. The digital playground is here to stay, especially as more and more kids have access to the electronic world. According to a recent study by Common Sense Media, nearly all children (98 percent) age 8 and under live in a home with some type of mobile device and 43 percent of children now have their own tablet device, up from 7 percent four years ago and less than 1 percent in 2011. (Source: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/0-8_executivesummary_release_final_1.pdf)

The Genius of Play™, whose mission is to raise awareness about the pivotal role of play in child development, convened a panel of experts at the Family Tech Summit at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in January 2018 to explore the evolving nature of play in today's world and provide parents with guidance on how to incorporate digital as well as traditional play into a child's daily routine.

TRADITIONAL OR DIGITAL PLAY?

According to The Genius of Play, kids learn through **all** types of play—both structured and unstructured versions, as well as traditional and digital play. Just as kids need a balanced diet of healthy foods to grow and a variety of subjects to study in school to stimulate distinct parts of the brain, inspiring them to engage in diverse types of play creates well-rounded individuals.



The Genius of Play conducted extensive research and input from more than 50 experts in a variety of disciplines around play: teachers, pediatricians, occupational therapists, psychologists, and many others. The research has uncovered that all kinds of play, in a variety of settings, improve a child's cognitive, communication, creative, emotional, physical, and social skills. However, when it comes to digital play, high-quality experiences and parents being engaged in their child's digital play is paramount.

INTRODUCING THE PANELISTS:



Sara DeWitt is vice president of PBS Kids Digital. Over the last 18 years, DeWitt has worked at the

forefront of new digital platforms in an effort to be everywhere kids are from websites and mobiles apps to streaming video, augmented reality, 3D-rendered experiences, and wearable technologies. Before her career in public media, DeWitt worked as a preschool teacher, a management researcher, and studied media habits of children in rural areas of the United States. She holds a bachelor's and master's degree in English from Stanford University.



As an emotional dynamics expert, **Dr. Erik Fisher** provides innovative approaches to therapy to families,

working with children as young as two through adulthood. Play has been an integral part of his work. He has published two books, *The Art of Empowered Parenting: The Manual You Wish Your Kids Came With* and *The Art of Managing Everyday Conflict: Understanding Emotions and Power Struggles*.



Dr. Jodi Sherman LeVos, director of child development & learning at Mattel, obtained her PhD in developmental science from the University

of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, with a concentration in children's mathematical and cognitive development. LeVos has helped inform parents, educators, the Academy of Pediatrics, investors/analysts, and the media about the importance of play and school readiness and ways to navigate screen time.

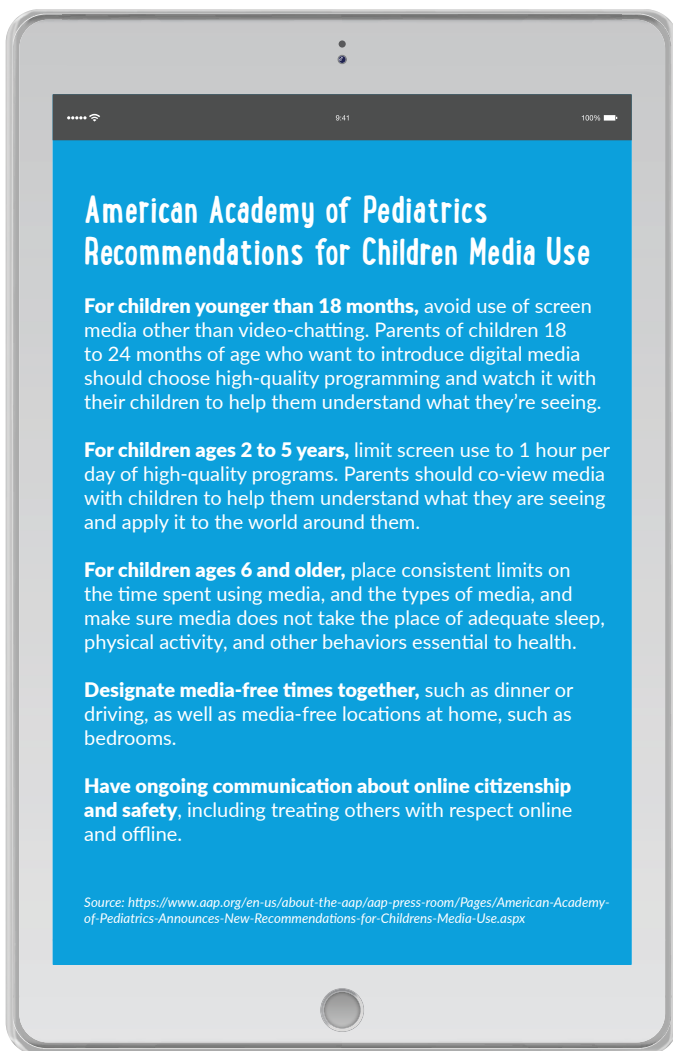


Panel moderator **Ken Seiter** is The Toy Association's executive vice president of marketing communications. In this role, he is responsible

for the development, implementation, and oversight of the Association's communications strategies, key messaging, and brand integrity programs, including The Genius of Play movement, which raises awareness of play's benefits and has successfully encouraged millions of families to make time for play in their day-to-day lives. Having earned a master's degree in educational psychology, Seiter taught emotionally-handicapped and learning-disabled children and saw firsthand how play and toys drive their healthy development.

THE DIGITAL PLAYGROUND

Q: Why is digital play a concern to many parents and how can they ensure that their children's development is benefiting from it?



American Academy of Pediatrics Recommendations for Children Media Use

For children younger than 18 months, avoid use of screen media other than video-chatting. Parents of children 18 to 24 months of age who want to introduce digital media should choose high-quality programming and watch it with their children to help them understand what they're seeing.

For children ages 2 to 5 years, limit screen use to 1 hour per day of high-quality programs. Parents should co-view media with children to help them understand what they are seeing and apply it to the world around them.

For children ages 6 and older, place consistent limits on the time spent using media, and the types of media, and make sure media does not take the place of adequate sleep, physical activity, and other behaviors essential to health.

Designate media-free times together, such as dinner or driving, as well as media-free locations at home, such as bedrooms.

Have ongoing communication about online citizenship and safety, including treating others with respect online and offline.

Source: <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/American-Academy-of-Pediatrics-Announces-New-Recommendations-for-Childrens-Media-Use.aspx>

Dr. Erik Fisher: "Play has traditionally been defined as anything that's spontaneously done for its own sake, produces pleasure, and leads one to the next stage of mastering. Play includes activities that are freely chosen and directed by children and arise from intrinsic motivation. When children play, the means are more important than the end; so why they're doing it and what outcome they're looking for isn't the important part. It's HOW they do it. One of the things I see happening now is tech toys involve programming and rules, and when we add too much structure, we may be affecting the ability for our kids to learn creativity. Research in this area shows that kids who actually played through free play experiences with little or no structure developed executive functioning skills better than kids who are given guidelines of how to play."

Dr. Jodi Sherman Levos: "Here in America, when we think about digital play concerns, it has a lot to do with screen time, lack of creativity, and lack of downtime. In terms of how parents

can ensure their kids are benefiting from the experience, it really comes down to the quality of the content and experience. When the content is designed with clear learning objectives by experts, it can actually have positive outcomes, especially when kids and parents use it together in a balanced amount of time. Sixty five percent of kids today are going to grow up to have jobs that don't even exist today. So we have a mission—as parents, educators, and thought leaders—to prepare kids for a future that we don't fully understand. So right now, what we can do is simply help kids be successful as lifelong learners and establish critical learning skills through play, whether it's digital or physical play."

Dr. Erik Fisher: "The issue that we have to look at isn't that technology is a bad thing, but do we have balance? We need to create quality experiences with our kids that make the best use of our time. Technology should not be a babysitter nor an entertainer or teacher."

Play Exists in a Variety of Arenas and Forms

Opportunities for play are everywhere and takes many forms. Play exists at home, in schools, in stores, at amusement parks, and more. And when it comes to playing with toys, kids get the most benefit when traditional and digital play exist simultaneously, in a balanced environment with high-quality interactions.

"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."

–Fred Rogers

TECHNOLOGY ADDS TO THE PLAY EXPERIENCE

It's not just tech for tech's sake. Technology gives kids a variety of perspectives on the world and diversifies the play experience. Technology supports more traditional play by reinforcing the key values while adding another dimension to the play experience.

Q: How is technology impacting our ability to learn and develop through play?

Sara DeWitt: "Technology is adding new layers by immersing kids into their passions. For example, if a child is really into dinosaurs, technology can make the child feel they've been transported to prehistoric times, they can explore different dinosaur species through many apps that bring that world to life. I try to look at the game play as a way to understand how kids are learning and enhance it."



Look for Play Patterns that are Great for Kids

The best kind of high-tech play involves quality engagement in short bursts that then gets kids interested and extends their knowledge in other areas, thereby improving their cognitive, communication, and social skills.

Q: How can technology help drive the benefits of play?

Dr. Jodi Sherman Levos: “Let’s make sure we’re understanding the ways in which kids like to play and then incorporate technology in the best ways that make sense to support that. I think the best example of that is personalized learning. If a child is playing and the back-end system is understanding that the child struggles on a particular concept, then tutorials or prompts to help them solve the problem at hand would be ideal. So I think personalized and adaptive learning for really young kids, married with the insights for parents, is something that technology can do even better than physical analog play.”

Sara DeWitt: “Think about the ecosystem the child is in and ask yourself, ‘How does the technology adapt to what the kid is doing and how do we bring the parent or educator into it as well?’ Also, a successful app isn’t an app that draws a kid in for 45 minutes straight. That’s a terrible play pattern, especially for a preschooler.”

Q: What are parents saying about play? Do they understand the benefits? Do they draw a clear line between traditional and digital play?

Dr. Jodi Sherman Levos: “It depends on who we are asking. In China, for example, play in some parents’ perceptions is a bit more of a luxury. Play takes away from time that could be spent in formal education. It’s something that doesn’t seem inherently beneficial there. So we’re working to help parents understand the developmental benefits of play, the importance of play, the fact that play IS child’s work, and that’s one of the primary ways in which they learn about the world

around them. In the United States, parents do understand that play is beneficial, but may not understand how or why. I'm a mom and for me, I'm very cognizant of allowing them to have time to play with digital experiences and time to play with analog physical toys. What's important is that they're being creative, whether it's with a screen or with physical blocks and building."

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL PLAY

The challenge many families face is a lack of quality time spent together. Though a parent's presence is important regardless of the play activity, when it comes to the digital playground, parents are highly encouraged to participate and/or ask their child questions after their experience. If this sort of interaction is set in place at an early age, it builds on communication skills between parent and child, helps build trust, and prepares children for more serious talks on internet safety as they grow. Technology should have its place in the family, but must be built on quality interactions.

Q: What are important considerations for parents when allowing digital products into their home?

Sara Dewitt: "Play is how kids understand the world. It's how they work out different situations; it's how they think about who they might be and how they build their aspirations. So, when we bring the tech layer into this, we need to think about how tech adds to that ability for kids to explore the world. Tech can open kids' eyes to a part of the play experience that they've never seen before and lets them explore it and hear the sounds of that place. That's something unique that tech can do."

Q: Why is it important for parents to play with their kids?

Dr. Jodi Sherman Levos: "I support the four C's of 21st Century learning: creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. Engaging your child in the ways that they play and understanding what excites them about what they're doing is



Checklist for Positive Digital Play



High-quality content that's designed with clear learning objectives

- Promotes cognitive thinking
- Builds language skills
- Encourages social skills
- Promotes creativity



Balance

- Good mix of traditional and digital play in a child's life is ideal



Quality interactions between parents and kids

- Parents are encouraged to play with their child and share the online experience
- If the child plays alone, parents should talk to their child afterwards about the game experience and encourage discussions
- When interactions take place, the parent becomes a part of the child's digital "play life" and is teaching the child to talk about his/her online experiences, which becomes helpful as kids become older and are exposed to more online

great. For example, my son gets very excited when he explains to me how he's unlocked a certain game level he's playing, and what's happening here is he's teaching me at the same time."

Dr. Erik Fisher: "Parents serve as role models—they're responsible for staying in touch with their kids and being present in their lives. When it comes to playing with kids, one of the things I encourage parents most to do is to remember what it was like to be a kid. Play with your kids, whether it's with building blocks or video games/online. When you play with them, talk to them about their experiences, their online interactions at an early age, because what you're doing here is teaching your child that they can talk to you, which is essential, especially as they become older."

Sara DeWitt: "Parents have this fear of not being able to play with their kids—they're not sure how to approach

it. And ultimately, parents often feel like they aren't equipped to be able to help with their kids learning. One of the things we've been talking to parents about and doing a little bit of research around is just getting parents to talk to kids about what they played, especially play with technology. Oftentimes the kid is doing this kind of play alone and, therefore, the parent doesn't actually know what happened. But if the parent asks the child afterwards what they were playing, how they got past that level, etc... that's working on communication skills with your kids. It's bonding

“If your child were to play in the neighborhood, you would want to know who they are meeting, where they are going, what they plan to do, and when they will return home. Similarly, becoming more familiar with your child’s internet use is an important hurdle to overcome. The seclusion you experience from your child’s internet use makes learning about their use difficult, though by no means impossible. In this world, you and your children will teach each other. You will help your young children learn internet basics today, but they will teach you its intricacies tomorrow.”

—Douglas Brodman, PhD

Source: <https://med.nyu.edu/child-adolescent-psychiatry/news/csc-news/2016/parenting-digital-age>

with your kids. But more importantly, it’s also beginning to introduce the parent to the kind of play that the kid is engaging in, and as soon as parents see those experiences, they become a lot more relaxed about it.”

Dr. Erik Fisher: “Look at what Pokémon Go did for getting kids out in the world and running around and exploring places they might not have. So as a parent, you’re getting out there with your kid and exploring. You have an AR type of app that’s able to make nature come alive and be educational. You’re developing the competency of parents, kids, and developing an awareness of a whole world that to me a whole generation missed out on.”

Sara DeWitt: “We need to remember that kids today are seeing devices and screens all around them. It’s everywhere in our world now. We need to play a role in teaching kids responsible use of that media. I get concerned when some parents or educators have an all or nothing kind of approach, saying kids shouldn’t have any screen time at all or no tech time at all, and then kids aren’t really learning how to use it responsibly. So if you introduce it, you also have the responsibility of teaching the child how to best use it.”

IN SUMMARY

While digital play is sometimes dismissed as empty time, The Genius of Play, along with the experts on this panel, has evidence that there are many benefits to letting kids play in the digital playground. The key is balance, high-quality engagement and parental involvement. The Genius of Play works to help parents meet child-rearing challenges by providing current expert information and opinion, accessible play ideas, and other resources.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Visit **www.TheGeniusofPlay.org** for more resources and information.

