

The Power of Play

Research has shown there is great value in play. Play fosters imagination and creativity, and adds to your tool box of problem solving skills. It's been shown that it's easier to learn and retain new information if taught while playing. Group play helps strengthen empathy, trust and compassion. Laughter decreases stress and anxiety. Physical play is a great, *fun* source of exercise.

One of the millions of things I love about the Park District is that we PLAY! That's our thing! We encourage children to try new activities and have fun. This is a space where the focus is on fun and increasing esteem, rather than ability or competition. Let your kid do something different. If you think he might enjoy tennis, before you build a tennis court in your backyard, give a tennis clinic a whirl. He might be a natural, fall in love with the sport and go to Wimbledon. Or it might turn out tennis isn't his best sport, but he had a blast trying and made some new friends in the process. I, as a parent, want to remind myself that there's value in playing for fun's sake, rather than focusing on activities that we are already good at. This fosters confidence and inspires "possibility thinking!" It has been found that children who have been allowed time to free play later believe that they can accomplish more and feel they can be more successful.

I have compared our Summer Activity Guide to a small plates menu or buffet. We have a variety of activities covering interests of arts, music, sports, and skills. All sessions are intentionally smaller chunks of time. This allows more flexibility in schedules to try an assortment of programs, while working around family vacations, team sports, or whatever else is on your summer calendar. One of our family rituals is gathering together over the new Activity Guide. We mark up the book, circling the programs we're excited about or want to try, challenging ourselves to do something new each year.

Another way to try a variety of activities, all in one setting, is Summer Day Camp. It's a fantastic combination of arts and crafts, games, sports, opportunities to learn new things (like "Kids in the Kitchen" cooking week), immersed in laughter and fun! Did you know you can also try out Day Camp for just a few days or a week, without a long term commitment? It's a wonderful way to supplement other activities, camps, or vacations. A lot of families have tried it out, only to fall in love with the program and make it a regular part of summer.

The benefits of play apply to adults, too, not just kids. As adults, we quickly prioritize work over play, often to the point of the latter becoming non-existent. I've found myself believing the falsity that it's a waste of time, frivolous, or immature. Until I do it. It could be playing a board game at game

night. Perhaps you like to spend a quiet weekend morning putting together a puzzle. (Be sure check out Puzzle Palooza on May 19th at Teen Town!) Take time to have a pretend tea party with the kiddos or build with blocks. Yesterday, the kids and I played a few games of Sharks vs. Minnows. What an amazing stress reliever and way more fun than 30 minutes on the treadmill. If you like something more structured, gather a group of friends and join our softball or sand volleyball leagues. (Registration deadline for both is May 7th!)

Allowing ourselves and our children the time to play is healthy for the mind, body, and soul. I'm very thankful that we have so many opportunities to do so in Rochelle.