

By Jacqueline Emodok

**S**olomon Ogwang and his younger brother Emmanuel Emuge love playing together. The two, who are three years apart, imitate movie characters or act out roles, such as teacher and doctor.

Sometimes, the siblings just run about with their cars or chase each other.

Although such sessions are usually characterised by laughter and happiness, occasionally, one of them is heard crying.

When this happens the victim usually runs to report to a parent, with the perpetrator right behind making an apology. After the parent listens to an account of what happened, the guilty party is forgiven but warned not to repeat the offence.

Before long, the two brothers are back to playing together.

Vivian Kudda, a clinical psychologist at the American Refugee Council, explains that play is every child's language and their primary occupation. Play fosters creativity and self-discovery and also serves as a platform to help children resolve their problems.

Dr Hellen Namusoke, a paediatrician at Bethany Children's Clinic in Kampala, says during play, children interact with other children, parents and guardians which fosters their social and emotional development.

#### Exploring the world

Children learn social skills, such as communication, when they play because they learn new vocabulary, which fosters language development through the interaction with peers and adults.

Play also allows children to explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practising adult roles.

"They use their imagination when they take up roles, such as that of a mother, and practise doing chores, such as cooking, ironing or looking after the baby. Some even imitate vocations; for example, as a priest marrying couples, baptising children or presiding over mass," Namusoke says.

# Play develops children socially and emotionally



Play helps children bond with their peers and, sometimes, with adults. It is also an activity for learning and nurturing

Kudda explains that young children imitate whatever they can from adults, both behaviour and language, including use of gestures and mimicking facial expressions.

"Children's cognitive and emotional judgment is not fully developed in terms of objective reasoning. They may not distinguish between right and wrong, especially the young ones of about three or four years. It is against this background that adults are termed as role models," Kudda explains.

She adds that it is important to know who a child's friends are as well as understand the behaviour of the adults around them. Simply put, playing and learning go hand in hand; a child practises what they see, hear or observe.

"How an adult behaves is influential in shaping a child, which calls for them to be careful. Children are great learners by nature," Kudda adds.

She notes that when a parent notices unbecoming behaviour in their child, they should check in with the people the child spends significant time with, such as the maid, peers, neighbours and relatives.

In addition, parents should not ignore the influence of television, as a child can also imitate television characters and language.

It could also help to discuss concerns with a teacher or a parent. However, Kudda observes, that the challenge here is, most times, parents become defensive because

reporting a concern reflects a gap on their part. Therefore, when, how and where the feedback is given is important.

#### Working in groups

Play can be child-driven or adult-driven. Namusoke, however, recommends that it should be child-driven.

Child-driven play should be undirected to allow them learn how to work in groups, share, negotiate, accept losses, appreciate hard work, solve conflicts and learn self-advocacy skills.

These skills will improve the interaction between one child and another, and also be helpful in creating meaningful relationships.

"Imagine a child who has quarrelled with their little sister wants to play, but then

it dawns on them that they do not have someone to do it. That child will find a way of resolving that conflict either by apologising or sharing their toys so they can have a playmate," Namusoke illustrates.

When children solve problems, they also grow emotionally because problem-solving builds their self-esteem and confidence.

"Most importantly, make-belief play helps to free up children and allows them to get over things they would have initially feared," Kudda says.

#### Supervision crucial

Experts advise that as children play, it is good practice to have an adult supervise them. This is important, not only

#### CHILD-DRIVEN PLAY

According to paediatric research published in the Gateway titled: *The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and promoting strong parent-child bonds* by Kenneth R. Ginsburg and the committee on psychosocial aspects of child and family health, when play is child-driven, children practise decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest and ultimately engage fully in passions they wish to pursue. The research indicates that in order for children to reap the benefits of socio-emotional learning, play should be unscheduled time to allow for peer interactions.

The study adds that the adult should also involve themselves in child-driven play because it gives them the opportunity to see the world from the children's point of view. "When parents see the world from their children's point of view, they learn to communicate more effectively with their children."

"During such interactions, children also learn that parents are fully paying attention to what they do, which helps to build their confidence and nurture enduring relationships," Ginsburg explains.

because children can fight, fall or hurt each other, but it is also helpful to ensure all children are actively involved.

"Some children are shy, which may hinder them from full participation," Kudda says. Adults should also look out for the play patterns of their children because play enables parents to master their children's personality.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

### Importance of building your child's confidence and self-esteem

A child's sense of confidence is shaped and nurtured (or not) by those who care for him/her. Parents and caregivers can help

ingredient for school success. Children who are confident are eager to learn new skills and face new challenges

#### Self-confidence

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