

# Games children need to play



Speech therapist Catherine de Beaux plays games with Audrey and Riley.

When you're busy, it's tempting to stick your child in front of the TV. But games and activities are vital to their development, writes **Gail Anthony**.

**H**ave you finished Christmas shopping, writing Christmas cards, preparing Christmas dishes, packing for that week away? At this busy and stressful time of the year the last thing you need is kids under your feet, talking to you, asking questions, wanting your attention. The easy option is to sit them in front of the TV or computer.

But experts say these sedentary pastimes are not doing our children any favours. Childhood obesity is increasing at an alarming rate, reaching epidemic proportions throughout the world and causing major physical and psychological damage.

Perth child development expert Trevor Parry believes such inactive diversions are OK in moderation but shouldn't replace active pastimes or interactions with people.

"Gameboys, DVDs and other electronic toys have their place," he says, "but it's hard to keep them in balance and prevent them from intruding on shared activities, relationships, and becoming almost addictive. It's also difficult to keep usage to small doses. When coupled with too much snacking, it's almost as though the only muscles that get regular exercise are those of the buttocks, jaw and thumbs."

Parents should encourage energetic activities from an early age so they become part of normal play. If you play outside with your children, you are far more likely to do something that expends more energy. Go for a walk or ride your bikes and trikes to the park for a game of chase, to throw a frisbee or fly a kite.

Just as important for preschoolers is the acquisition of skills and knowledge that will prepare them for life — how to behave appropriately, manage their feelings, cope with things that upset them and build relationships. Learning to be independent in eating, dressing, grooming and toileting will build confidence and help adjustment to new environments such as kindergarten and pre-primary. Parents are the best teachers in these early years and the optimum medium for this learning is relaxed and fun play.

"Children learn through play, through relationships with parents, other adults and their peers," says Dr Parry. "Appropriate experiences in the

early years will assist brain development in the areas of gross and fine motor skills, language, problem-solving, social and emotional development, self-regulation — the lot."

Research shows children who experience a nurturing environment early in life and are encouraged to learn through play often have higher IQ scores and adjust more easily at school.

Local speech pathologist Catherine de Beaux agrees parents play a vital role in educating their young offspring.

"The best Christmas present you can give your child is your time," she says. "Play is a child's work. Every time your child plays with you they 'work' at improving their speech and social skills. Playing with your child also allows you to learn more about them, their interests, abilities and motivation. Experiment to find what your child is interested in and include these in play. A tub of soapy water or a bowl of uncooked pasta can be heaps of fun if you allow your 'inner child' to be set free and have fun with your child."

"Playing with your child involves using pretend play. Pretend or imaginary play is crucial for a pre-schooler's language and social development. It promotes abstract thought, problem-solving skills and creativity. Pretend play helps children interact with others and practise living in their world."

Expensive toys are not necessary for fun play with young children. Many everyday items found around the home will provide them with hours of educational entertainment.

Cardboard boxes can be pushed, pulled, climbed into, filled with toys, stacked or taken to a park to slide down grassy hills. Other household "toys" include paper and paint, water, sand, mud, garden/park to explore, pots, pans and wooden spoons, wooden blocks, pegs and containers to put them in, animals/insects to watch, old clothes to dress up in and playdough for modelling and creativity.

When children use their hands to explore, play, stack blocks, scribble with crayons and make shapes with playdough, they are developing their hand skills or fine motor skills.

"What's important is spending time showing your child how to play with the toys you buy, not just providing the toys," Ms de Beaux says. "Evidence shows that children who play elaborately in their preschool years have better reasoning, problem solving, vocabulary, comprehension and expressive language skills. Every time you play with your child you work at improving their literacy, learning, self-esteem and social skills."

The message is clear: make time as often as you can to play with your preschooler. Let your child lead the game, keep it safe, allow plenty of time, let them make mistakes so they can learn from them, listen to your child and talk about what he/she is playing. Above all, encourage your child to play with you and value their efforts — remember, they're little and they're learning.

So as you're wrapping those last Christmas presents and you hear a call from the family room, "Mum, I'm bored. Can I watch a DVD?", reply, "Go and get your bike out and let's go for a ride."