WHY PLAY STILL MATTERS IN A SCREEN-FIRST WORLD

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Fifty years ago, children spent their free time climbing, exploring, creating and making friends face-to-face. Today, childhood looks very different, with screens playing an increasingly prominent role in family life.

Yet as Gymboree Play & Music celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, families across the UK are proving that the fundamental benefits of play remain unchanged.

The milestone comes at a time when concerns are growing around children's screen use and opportunities to explore, discover and learn through play. Recent research has highlighted growing concerns around children's screen use, while other studies suggest parents are spending less time playing with their young children than they were just a few years ago.

For many families, that has reinforced the importance of creating opportunities to learn, connect and have fun together through play.

From Hampstead to Solihull and Putney, families are sharing stories of how Gymboree Play & Music has become part of their family lives over many years, helping successive generations build confidence, curiosity and creativity through play.

For Hampstead mum Zakiyah, the connection spans more than two decades. Her mum, Amina, taught at Gymboree Play & Music Hampstead in the early 2000s, meaning Zakiyah grew up attending classes herself. Today, she is back at the same centre with her 11-month-old son, Hadid.

She said: "Gymboree Play & Music has been part of my family's story for many years. My mum taught at Gymboree Play & Music Hampstead when I was little, so I grew up going to classes with her, and now I'm bringing my own son, Hadid, which feels incredibly special.

"I still remember having my name sticker put on at the start of each class and celebrating my fourth birthday there. It's amazing that some of those little traditions are still part of the experience today.

"Looking back, it's wonderful to think that somewhere which played such a happy part in my own childhood is now helping my son discover, learn and grow through play. While so much has changed over the years, the same focus on learning through play, building confidence and creating lasting memories remains just as important today as it was then."

In Solihull, Emma and Chris Penn have made Gymboree Play & Music part of family life for more than ten years, bringing all four of their children to classes. Emma said: "Gymboree Play & Music has been a huge part of our family's life over the years. We first joined when our eldest child was a baby, and we've now brought all four of our children to classes.

"As parents, you try lots of different activities, but Gymboree Play & Music is the one thing we've always come back to. The classes create dedicated time to have fun together, build confidence and make special memories. It's been so much more than a weekly class. It's become part of our family's story."

Meanwhile, Jane Goldstein first attended Gymboree Play & Music as a parent and now enjoys classes with her grandchild in Solihull. She said: "I first brought my twins, Sam and Leah, to Gymboree Play & Music in 2010 when they were two years old, and they loved it so much that we continued going even after they started nursery. Some days they'd eat their lunch in the car on the way from Gymboree Play & Music to school because they didn't want to miss their classes.

"We followed Gymboree Play & Music as it moved to different locations in Solihull, celebrated birthdays there and made so many wonderful memories along the way.

"Now I'm bringing my grandson Robin, who has been attending for the past two and a half years. It's been lovely to see how the programmes have evolved while still keeping the same focus on learning through play.

"Watching a new generation discover, explore and build confidence through the classes has been a real joy, and it's wonderful to know that Gymboree Play & Music is still creating those same special memories for families today."

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For nanny Melanie Wenham, Gymboree Play & Music has been a constant throughout more than two decades of caring for young children. She said: "I first came to Gymboree Play & Music as a nanny in Putney in 2003 and have continued to bring children to classes over the past two decades, first in London and then at Gymboree Play & Music Tunbridge Wells after it opened in 2018.

"Across all those years, one thing has never changed – the welcoming atmosphere, the fantastic teachers and the way the classes help children learn, grow and build confidence through play. Even during lockdown, the online classes helped keep that sense of fun and routine going, and the open gym sessions have always offered brilliant value for families.

"What makes me smile most is that some of the children I first brought to Gymboree Play & Music are now in their twenties and still remember their Gymbo days. That says so much about the lasting impact those early experiences can have.

"It's been a privilege to introduce so many children to the joy of learning through play, and I still love bringing little ones to Gymboree Play & Music whenever I can."

These stories reflect a wider trend of families seeking opportunities to balance increasingly digital lifestyles with active, face-to-face experiences that encourage communication, creativity and meaningful shared experiences.

Arleta Darusalam, UK Franchisor, Gymboree Play & Music, said: "Children today are growing up in a very different world from the one many of their parents experienced. Yet they still need opportunities to move, explore, imagine, create and learn alongside other people.

"Perhaps the greatest testament to the power of play is the number of families who continue to make Gymboree Play & Music part of their family lives over many years. We're hearing from parents bringing multiple children through our programmes, grandparents returning with grandchildren, and families whose connection to Gymboree Play & Music spans many different stages of family life."

"Those stories are a powerful reminder that while childhood may have changed, the importance of play has not.

"For 50 years, Gymboree Play & Music has helped families learn, grow and create lasting memories through play, and today that role feels just as important as ever."

As Gymboree Play & Music celebrates its 50th anniversary, the organisation is reflecting on the role it has played in family life over the past five decades, with many families maintaining a connection to Gymboree Play & Music across multiple generations and stages of childhood.

Throughout June and July, centres across the UK will be hosting special anniversary celebrations featuring Gymbo, the much-loved Gymboree Play & Music mascot who was first introduced in 1985, bringing together families past and present to celebrate five decades of learning, laughter and connection.

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