

FOCUS: HOW TO PLAY WITH YOUR CHILD

In this week's newsletter we look at why playing with your child is so important for their development. With lots of children still at home we felt it may be helpful to include some tried and tested pointers on how to play with your children and how to avoid the most common pitfalls parents encounter when playing with their children.

Why is it important for you to play with your children?

There is a widespread belief in our society that the time parents and children spend playing together is frivolous and unproductive. According to Doctor Carolyn Webster-Stratton we should break loose from this idea because play benefits children in many ways by providing opportunities for them to learn who they are, what they can do and how to relate to the world around them. Even if parents do understand that play is important they can mistakenly assume that they don't need to be involved in it and that it is instinctive for the child.

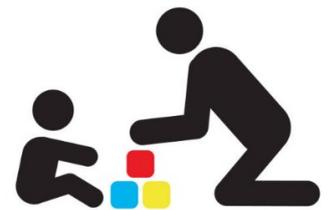
- > Play with adults helps build warm relationships and strong attachments between family members.
- > Play with adults can help your children learn to solve problems.
- > Play with adults can help encourage children's imaginations.
- > Play with adults can help develop your children's vocabulary.
- > Play with adults help children interact socially by teaching them to take turns, share and be sensitive to the feelings of others.
- > Taking time to play with your children can promote their feelings of self-worth and competence.

1. FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Some parents try to structure their child's play by giving lessons on what to do-how to build the castle the *right* way. Follow their lead with their ideas and imagination and try not to impose your own. Try not to give commands and instructions, instead imitate their actions and do what they ask you to do. You'll soon discover that when you take a step back they'll become more interested in play and more creative.

2. AVOID POWER STRUGGLES

Have you ever found yourself in a power struggle with your nursery-age child over who won a game, or what the rules are? Many parents have! Toddlers and younger children don't really understand rules or really organised play.



Not until 7/8 do they begin to cooperate in this way. Nonetheless they can enjoy playing at a game with adults as long as excessive rules and competitiveness are avoided. If your young one feels the odds are against them and there is no way to win they'll look to control the situation in other ways-like having a tantrum! You don't need to worry about teaching them to lose-other aspects of life will teach them this.

3. PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

It is easy to fall into this trap 'No, that doesn't go there', these kinds of criticisms and correction eventually make children wary of exploring their ideas-they also tend to foster helplessness in youngsters because their parents' attention is on what is being done wrong rather than what was good. Don't judge, correct or contradict your child. 'That's great', 'How exciting', 'How clever' are all good phrases to use. Try to praise something your child does when playing every few minutes. **For more on praise and encouragement please see Issue Four p. 3-4.**

4. ENCOURAGE EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH FANTASY PLAY

Some adults are reluctant to engage in imaginative play-to crawl on the floor making train noises or to act out fairy tales. They feel silly and embarrassed. However engaging in this type of play will help build children's imaginary worlds, creative thinking and story telling but also because it helps children learn to regulate emotions for example it helps develop empathy and sympathy. If their doll falls from their imaginary horse, your child may sound out the dolls feelings of hurt or excitement. Encourage puppets, dress-up clothes, pretend telephones or discussions about imaginary creatures.

5. ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD'S PROBLEM SOLVING

Try not to give too much help or take over an activity as this decreases a child's sense of achievement and self-esteem and fosters dependence on adults. Instead of suggesting or demonstrating how to do the puzzle, suggest doing it together. They sometimes might ask for you help when they don't really want it and may just want your attention. Often all you need to do is sit back and be there at the side-lines to encourage and praise enough to get them to problem solve their way through the task.

6. GIVE ATTENTION TO PLAY

When children are playing, parents tend to seize the opportunity to take care of their business (household chores, reading etc.) which is fine of course, but some fail to pay any attention to their child during this time and may even get annoyed if the child interrupts these activities to ask a question related to their play. The result of this is youngsters may feel that they don't get attention when sitting quietly and so in order to get some act out and misbehave. Try to structure time dedicated to playing with your child because if a child feels they have positive parental attention they will be less likely to invent inappropriate ways of attracting it.

Be prepared for...

- > Times when your child plays inappropriately or misbehaves by whining, shouting, throwing toys etc. If this can be ignored, turn away and begin to play with another toy as if it were very interesting.
- > If behaviour gets really destructive simply end the play period with a simple explanation as, 'when you throw toys, we have to stop playing'.
- > Fear of play carrying on forever? And then a big fuss when it ends. Prepare your child 5 minutes before the end 'In a few minutes I will stop playing with you', ignore any protests and try to distract them with something else. Once your children realise they cant manipulate you into playing longer, the protests will subside.
- > Building in a regular play period each day will stop the need to protest, realising that there will be another opportunity to play with you the next day and so on.

REMEMBER

- > Follow your child's lead
- > Pace at your child's level
- > Don't expect too much-give your child time
- > Don't compete with your child
- > Praise and encourage your child's ideas and creativity-don't criticise
- > Engage in role play and make-believe with your child.
- > Be an attentive and appreciative audience
- > Use descriptive comments instead of asking questions
- > Be a social-skills coach by promoting, describing and praising children's friendly behaviours, e.g. helping, sharing, taking turns, being polite.
- > Curb your desire to give too much help-encourage children's problem solving.
- > Laugh and remember to have fun yourself when playing with your children.