

Play for Connection

A strong connection between parent and child is essential for healthy child development. The quality of this attachment also helps parents guide their children toward better behaviour and self-discipline. Studies have shown that attachment is strengthened by including short periods of “child-directed play” as part of a regular routine. This intentional way of playing can give you insight into your child and may lead to more cooperation at other times of the day.

Turn off the cell phone

When we are fully present in children’s play we send them the message that we value our time with them. The biggest reward for children is the attention of the people they love. They feel it when our attention wanders away from them; sometimes they get our attention back by misbehaving. So turn off your cell phone, set aside your “to-do” list and let yourself relax into play.

Follow your child’s lead

Your playtime will have the most impact if you let your child choose how to play. Schedule a regular time in your day, even just five or ten minutes, when you can really focus on your child. Watch what your child does and let him or her set the direction. When you put on music, does he want to dance around or does he want to beat the rhythm on a pot? When you take out the blocks, does she want to build something or put them into a pail and dump them out?

Your contribution is to **compliment, reflect, imitate, describe** and be **enthusiastic**.

- **Compliment** means noticing things like, “You’re taking your time pouring the water,” and “Your barn is big enough for all the animals.”
- **Reflect** means repeating what the child says in a slightly different way. The child says, “I like playing with sand.” You say, “It’s fun for you to play in the sandbox.”
- **Imitate** means copying what the child does. If he’s building a tower with blocks, you take some blocks and build a tower too. If he complains that you are copying him, or compares your tower to his, you can use the blocks to build something different.
- **Describe** means saying what your child is doing, making occasional comments like, “You built a boat and now you’re taking it apart.”

- Showing your **enthusiasm** means making your facial expression and tone of voice say how happy you are to be spending this time together.

If your child chooses a destructive or harmful activity, you can’t imitate it and the time for letting the child lead has to end. If your child’s behaviour is just annoying (whining, being rude, complaining), focus on the play activity by describing and complimenting what is going well. Your attention will encourage positive behaviour.

While you follow your child’s lead, try to **reduce your questions, orders and corrections**. Now is not the time to ask, “What colour is this car?” or “Can you count how many blocks are in this tower?” Many children feel pressured by this kind of quiz. They get flustered and stop playing. Instructions like, “Put the block here, it will work better,” can have a similar effect. You may just want to help, but your child is no longer directing the play. Even a remark like, “I think your airplane needs some wings,” can sound like a correction to sensitive children. They lose the sense of spontaneous play; it’s not their game anymore. That’s when children get upset, and things end badly.

Get down to your child’s level

Getting down to your child’s level means being **physically** at the same level, so you can play face to face and see each other’s expression easily. It also means adjusting the level of play to your child’s **developmental stage**. Offer materials that suit the child’s capabilities. A toddler might want to pound playdough flat or make marks with different tools. An older child might want to make little people that become characters in a story. When you respect children’s level of play, they can explore what suits their developmental stage.

Leave the plans at the office

To do child-directed play, you need to set aside your ideas about how things should turn out. Your child may take out a puzzle and decide to pile all the puzzle pieces up and then knock the pile over. Or she may use the puzzle pieces as cookies for a pretend tea party with her stuffed toys. There’s a time for learning to put puzzles together, but your child is also learning by using the puzzle pieces in a novel and unexpected way. Let go of your goal-directed adult thinking and just enjoy each other’s company. Your shared playtime will keep you connected for the rest of the day.

by Betsy Mann

This resource sheet is based on several sources related to child-directed play, including *Growing Up Brave* by Donna Pincus.