

Supporting Children's Play

Children explore and discover their world through play, and the essence of play is free choice: deciding what to do, when and with whom to do it. In a world that is rapidly changing, children need to learn and to practise the skill of making choices while they play.

Adults can play *with* children (peek-a-boo with a ten month old) or can *organize* children's play (coaching a soccer team). They can also *support* children's play without being directly involved. Here are some suggestions for enriching youngsters' games while leaving control in their hands.

Make Time

- Give children free time after they have spent a whole day in structured activities. Their play helps them integrate what they've learned.
- Time spent at structured lessons (swimming, gymnastics, piano, etc.) is not play time. Children can learn skills they will use later in play, but the essential element of free choice is missing during the lessons themselves.

Provide Space

- Baby proof your house so that your toddler can explore freely. Use the playpen for your four year old; he can take art projects and Lego constructions there to work on them out of baby's reach.
- Take children to a variety of play spaces, both indoors and outdoors. Local parks and family resource centres will stimulate different kinds of play.
- Put an old mattress in the basement to encourage acrobatics and develop gross motor skills.
- Play is rarely neat and tidy, so learn to put up with dirt and mess. Protect surfaces with newspapers and plastic cloths to make clean-up simpler. Make storage easy with shelves and transparent boxes at children's level.

Supply Materials and Equipment

- Expensive and elaborate toys are not necessary for children to have fun. A child may in fact be more attracted by the toy's packaging because her imagination can turn it into lots of other things.
- Adding a new element from time to time enriches the play environment and stimulates new interest. Try putting a garlic press on the playdough table. Join a toy library and bring home new toys each month.

- Become a collector of "loose parts"* that can be put together in different ways. Here are some examples: equipment like big blocks or different sizes of boxes, material like homemade playdough, props like small versions of tools, costumes like capes and hats, bits of "junk" collected in the park. All these allow children to play with ideas and explore possibilities while constructing their own toys.

Offer Companions

- Join in your children's play when you are invited, but remember to let them lead. They make the decisions and you follow.
- Invite friends over or bring your children to a play group. Another four year old will probably have a longer attention span for playing fireman than you do.

Give Feedback

- Once you've set the stage for play, just stand back and let it unfold. You might be needed to lift something heavy or to redirect unsafe play, but let children work through their own conflicts. When they are arguing, remember that working out *how* to play may be more important for them than actually getting down to the game.
- Respect children's efforts. Let them discover for themselves what works and what doesn't. They can't learn to solve their own problems if an adult is always doing it for them.
- Let children know you think their play is important. Don't interrupt unnecessarily. When it's time to stop, give them lots of warning.
- Weave a particularly successful play episode into a story to tell at bedtime. "Once there were some children who were all turned into mice by a magician in a red cape who said the magic words." Children will recognize their game and play it again.

Keep your own playful spirit alive. Nurture the child in yourself!

by Betsy Mann with notes from a workshop by Betty Jones of Pacific Oaks College, California.

*Simon Nicholson wrote "How Not To Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts" in *Landscape Architecture*, 1971.