

Parents at Play

Sometimes life with children seems to be one long string of tasks, and parents lament that family times that were supposed to be fun are reduced to one more thing to do. But the fun is there to be rediscovered in the magical world of play to which young children hold the key. Entering that world with them brings opportunities to discover a new point of view and to strengthen family ties.

Another view of time

While adults are worrying about the past and planning the future, children at play are absorbed in the present. They are more interested in looking at the rainbows in the oil slick on a puddle than in getting somewhere on time. This can be frustrating, but in fact there are benefits to slowing down to child speed. Many stress reduction techniques are based on the principle of focussing in the moment in order to relax from the constant pressures of daily life. Of course, some things do need to get done, but not always right away. If you can put aside your list of things to do for even a short time, you can think of your children's invitation to spontaneous play as your private, in-home stress-reduction program.

Building intimacy

In the world of play, parents and children get to know each other in a different way, building a precious intimacy. Shared smiles and laughter create a strong basis for relationships when many other forces seem to be pulling families apart.

Simple joys

It is often moments of very simple play that help children feel close to their parents. With your children, you can relive good times you remember from your own childhood ... or do things you never had a chance to do when you were young. When adults play with children, they can do things (like skip down the street singing a song out loud) that would look *weird* if they were alone. Here are a few suggestions you can adapt to the age of your own children.

- play peek-a-boo with a baby
- build a tower of blocks and laugh when they fall down
- walk in the rain and splash in puddles

- put a blanket over a table and see what it turns into (a bear's cave, a secret castle, ...)
- make paper finger puppets together and invent a puppet show
- have a winter picnic on a blanket in the kitchen
- collect pretty rocks
- skip stones on a lake or river
- sit in the park and watch the birds and the squirrels
- go for a walk after dark

Music and dance

If you have trouble turning off the message in your head that says "You really have more important things to do than play," try short-circuiting it with music or dance. Music and movement involve different parts of our brain and are especially relaxing, for both parents and children.

- Sing your children songs you remember from when you were young (lullabies, camp songs, family favourites).
- If you can't remember any songs, borrow books and tapes from the library and learn a few.
- Tapes are no substitute for your own voice; if you're too shy to sing alone, at least sing along. With children for an audience, you may find your voice.
- Put on whatever music you like—baroque to hip-hop—and dance your little one around the living room. (Bigger ones like this too.)

Laughter

If playing makes you feel kind of silly, laugh! Laughter is relaxing and releases emotions; some therapists recommend thirty minutes of laughter a day as a remedy for stress. Humour, by putting things into another perspective, can smooth out moments of conflict and defuse tense situations.

A playful attitude

With practice, you may be able to play your way right through some of those tasks on your list of things to do. Sorting laundry can turn into a game; singing funny songs will make the time spent doing errands seem shorter. In the world of play, the load seems lighter, and children and parents can draw closer together.

by Betsy Mann