

The Importance of Play

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Why is play so important to children?

Play is the language of childhood. It cuts through time and across all cultures; it is universal.

Through play children absorb what they are learning and make it their own. Through play children make sense of what they have seen and felt and understood. Children are learning and growing every day of their lives – long before they start school. And play is the primary means for them to learn and grow.

From animal studies, we know now that all mammals engage in play – they do this to practice the many different behaviours they will need as adults.

Play affects all aspects of the child’s development: how they develop physically, emotionally, socially and in their thinking.

How does play affect the attachment between parent and child?

When parent and child share experiences; when the parent spends time playing with their child, then the strength of the attachment between the child and the parent increases.

We know, from the research on the human brain in the last decade, that the child’s brain develops through relationships.

We know that children with healthy attachments are ready for school.

We also know that children with a healthy attachment to their parent are more likely to accept guidance and to pay attention to limits when the parent sets them. The research is clear that when the parent shares some play-time with their child, there is less conflict in the family.

What does playing with my child involve?

There are many different ways to organize play-time you share with your child. Short play periods regularly work well – 5 to 10 minutes a day or every 2nd day. Or the parent might be able to manage a half- hour period once a week. It’s useful if the play period

can be at a regular time, but it doesn't have to be. Start with what you can manage as a parent and what's comfortable for you. Being a parent is very busy – you only need to add a little bit of shared play-time for it to make a difference!

It's important that the shared play-time is unconditional. It needs to happen even if the child has acted up, or done things you've asked them not to, earlier in the day or the day before.

I don't usually play with my child. How should I start?

There is only one guideline that's important across all ages and all kinds of play. And that is to try to position yourself face-to-face with your child, so that when the child looks at you, they see their parent looking at them. You might only be able to manage this some of the time; and that's fine.

How you play with your child will depend on what you're comfortable with, how old your child is and the kind of things he or she likes to do.

You might observe your child at play first, and talk to them about what you see them doing. Then see how you can add to the play. Your child may have ideas for how you can do this. They might say: "Mommy, you take the fire truck and I'll work the bus". They might say: "Daddy, you be the monster and I'll grab you". You can start with what the child gives you and then add to it.

Or your child might be open to suggestions from you about how to begin. Go with what's comfortable for you at the start and then work towards sharing ideas for what to do with your child.

Playing indoors, you and your child could build a fort with sofa cushions, or a blanket and two chairs. Playing outside, you and your child could head down to the stream to toss stones, or you might toss a ball back and forth. Older children might like to play a board game or a more organized sport.

Any idea you can come up with that the child agrees to is the right one for your family. Any place you can begin to share the play with your child will be the right place for you.

Is this about spending money?

No. Playing with your child has to do with giving them your full attention and being there with them. You can invent games and turn household objects into toys. This is not about special outings at all.

What's important is the interaction between you and your child.

Having special play-time is going to feel kind of odd to me . . .

As parents, we spend time structuring what our children do and when they do it, we take them to school and after-school events, we set family rules and expectations and we impose consequences. Often, we interrupt children in the middle of their play, because it's time for them to do something else.

That's part of the work of being a parent. Special play-time isn't a substitute for these parenting tasks.

Special play-time is an addition. It's just a small snippet of time in the child's day or the child's week – but it's very important. It gives the child a different experience of their parent. And it gives you as parent a different experience of your child. The little bits of time when you can tune in to your child and play together create togetherness. They make setting limits, when you need to, easier. They make it more likely that your child will listen to and pay attention to you at other times.

The message special play-time gives to your child is very simple and extremely powerful. It says:

- I am here
- I see you
- I hear you
- I understand you
- I care about you.

Last comment:

I have a ten year old son, who talks with his Dad and me about what he's been doing and what he's thinking, but mostly now his play is with his friends. Yesterday morning, he and his Dad took on the chore of making the beds. Out of nothing, they suddenly started a pillow fight. They were laughing and thwacking the pillows around and making a big mess of everything! It took them 20 extra minutes to get the beds done but they finished up red faced and very cheerful. My son was in good spirits for most of the rest of the day.

Fun. Having fun together. Remember - it's very simple and extremely powerful. If you start with short periods of having fun with your child, then you're on a good road to the strengthening the bonds of attachment.