

The Importance of Parent-Child Play: 10 Tips to Make Playtime Fun for You and Healthy for Your 3-10 Year-old Child

From the parent-child attachment literature as well as from recent research in neuroscience, we are finding that **positive, face-to-face interactions between parent and child** are extremely important for healthy child development. These positive, face-to-face interactions require parents to be attentive, sensitive and responsive to their children. When this happens, a positive and strong parent-child relationship develops, which leads to a healthy child.

Parent-child play activities are some of the best ways parents can provide these positive face-to-face interactions to their young children.

Special Benefits of Parent-Child Play

Provides Children with the Benefits of Play in General

Parents can feel confident that engaging in parent-child play will help enormously with the healthy development of their children by tapping into all the benefits of play in general that are now recognized by child development experts as being a necessary part of healthy physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development of children.

Play allows children to use their imaginations and to develop their **creativity**. Play is important for children's **cognitive and intellectual development** by encouraging thinking, memory and problem-solving skills. Play helps children learn about their feelings and emotions and supports development of children's **emotional self-regulations skills**. With play, children develop their sensory and motor skills, which are hugely important not only in the healthy development of children's **brains and nervous systems**, but also for healthy **physical development**. Finally, parent-child play will especially support children's **social and language development**.

Strengthens Parent-Child Relationship

Many research studies have shown that parent-child play is one of the most effective ways to build a strong relationship with your child. When you enter your child's play world, it can be a truly special experience for both you and your child.

Children certainly enjoy playing with other children and this type of play is also necessary for healthy children's development. However, **parent-child play offers unique benefits** over child-child play simply because the parent is older and more mature and has had many more years of acquiring knowledge and experiencing life.

Play is especially **fun for children when their parents are involved**. All the positive feelings generated in playful interactions will go a long way in strengthening the parent-child relationship.

Benefits Parents Too!

Studies have shown that when parents have been given some **guidelines on how to play effectively** with their children, they feel **happier and more confident** engaging with their children in positive, face-to-face interactions. We know that the more positive interactions between parent and child, the stronger the relationship becomes, and this ultimately leads to children who are more cooperative and willing to please their parents.

How Can I Play with My Child Effectively?

Parent-child play happens when parents and children play and have fun together. But there are many, many ways for parents to play with their children and we are understanding more now that the way that parents play with their children is important. There have been minimal guidelines in the past on different ways for parents to play with their children.

We have now found that during parent-child play, certain parental responses are more helpful in supporting a child's healthy emotional development and strengthening the parent child relationship, while other parental responses are less helpful.

Child development experts have studied ways that parents can support the healthy development of their children. Research in the field of attachment has focused on the importance of secure and positive parent-child relationships. We have found that a particular style of parenting, called **authoritative parenting**, results in the best outcomes for children. Authoritative parenting is based on **how parents can respond to their children in ways that meet their children's essential needs**.

Several years ago, using the child development, parenting and attachment literature, I put together a Parent Checklist identifying what children need from their parents in order for an attuned and connected parent-child relationship to develop so that children's healthy development is supported.

Here are 8 things I found that children **need from their parents** that will **support a strong and positive parent-child relationship** as well as **enhance healthy child development**:

1. Safe and Stimulating Environment
2. Emotional Warmth
3. Attention
4. Acceptance
5. Encouragement
6. Assistance
7. Independence
8. Structure and Limits

The good news is that all of these needs can be met through parent-child play activities!

Let's look at each of these 8 needs and see how you can provide them to your child through parent-child play, especially for children between 3 and 10 years old.

Ways you can meet your child's need for a Safe and Stimulating Environment through parent-child play:

Providing a safe area that is age-appropriate and stimulates your child's interest and curiosity for exploration and play is one of the most basic things you can do to set your child on the right path to healthy development. By structuring this type of environment, you are encouraging your child to freely explore and learn. If the environment is unsafe or not age-appropriate, not only is it dangerous for your child, but he or she will be faced with numerous limits having to be set on things not to be touched, or with mounting frustration with toys that are too difficult or boredom with toys that are not challenging enough.

Tip #1: Structure the play area for parent-child play to be safe and interesting for your child.

- First of all, make sure the area you and your child will be playing in is **safe and child-proof**.
- Also, make sure there are a **variety of safe and age-appropriate toys** or play items available. Some categories of toys are more attractive for certain ages, for example, board games are more attractive to children over 5 years old. You don't want the toy or activity to be too easy so your child gets bored, but you also don't want it to be too challenging so your child becomes overly frustrated.
- Have toys **within easy reach** for your child. This may mean setting some things on low shelves or even on the floor for younger children.
- If possible, it is helpful to **group toys** into basic categories. Baskets or boxes are wonderful for organizing toys.
- Some parents like to **rotate toys** so that they are occasionally providing some fresh toys that haven't been played with in a while.
- The following toys are good for more **child-directed or unstructured play**:
 - People, animals, vehicles (miniatures, puppets, stuffed toys, etc.) and shelters for them such as houses, forts, barns, garages, etc. with furniture and other accessories
 - Real-life toys, such as baby doll, toy food and dishes, medical kit, play money, etc.
 - Dress-up items
 - Basic art supplies, such as paper and crayons or markers, and a flat drawing surface
 - Building blocks, rocks, sticks, stones, toy trees and plants, toy fences, play-doh, etc.
- The following toys generally have rules or instructions to follow and are good for more **structured play**:
 - Active games

- Construction toys, such as Lego, building sets, puzzles, etc.
- Craft activities
- Board or Card games

- For **active indoor play**, use soft foam balls, beanbags, pool noodles, Velcro target games, cushions, pillows, cotton balls, balloons, etc.

- Also, make sure there is a **clear area**, probably on the floor, to allow for set-up of toys and opportunities for some active play.

Ways you can meet your child's need for Emotional Warmth through parent-child play:

Parent-child play is one of the best ways you can provide emotional warmth to your child. Providing emotional warmth means expressing positive emotions towards your child such as happiness, love, affection, pride, confidence and optimism. It means expressing interest in and satisfaction with your child. It also means providing physical expressions of warmth to your child through gentle and playful touching as well as through eye contact, smiles and laughter. It means comforting your over-aroused child and being attentive but not intrusive to your quiet child.

Parent-child play is about having fun together, creating positive feelings, and just enjoying each other's company. It is a time to enter your child's special world of play and to allow his or her creative and imaginative ideas to blossom. You are your child's best toy!

Tip #2: Get down to your child's level during parent-child playtime.

- **Position yourself** close enough to your child to show you are paying attention and that you are interested, but not so close that you are being intrusive or restrictive to your child.

- **Get down to your child's level** by sitting on the floor, the ground, or on a stool. Sit near your child if he or she is sitting.

- When your child moves around the play area, **maintain your closeness** by following him or her.

- Make an effort to **watch your child's face**. Make eye contact when your child's eyes meet yours, but don't force this as it can seem unnatural if you are staring constantly at your child!

Tip #3: Try to keep things positive when you engage in parent-child play.

- If it is not convenient for you to play or you are distracted with other things, **you can say no** to your child's request to play together. ("I can't play with you right now.")
- You can either **direct your child** to some other activity ("Here are some stickers for you to decorate this page with") or **identify a time** to play that would work better for you ("I will have some time to play with you later after I put the laundry in the washer and clean up the kitchen")
- It is best not to feel **resentful and angry** when playing with your child, because he or she can usually sense this. However, at the same time, don't beat yourself up and feel **guilty** if it is not the right time to play together with your child right now.
- Remind yourself that although now is not the right time to play together, you will have other opportunities to play with your child when it would work better. Then **plan a time for later** to play with your child, even if it is only for 5 or 10 minutes.

Ways you can meet your child's need for Attention through parent-child play:

Providing your full and undivided attention to your child where you are interested in your child's world and where you can really watch and listen and respond appropriately to your child, is something that most parents understand is of prime importance. However, for most parents, finding time to do this can be very challenging.

The good news is that parent-child play activities are a fantastic way to help parents focus their attention fully on their children, even if it is only for a short period of time.

Tip #4: Put a time limit on playtime with your child so you can provide your full attention to your child during that time.

- **Parents are not supposed to play 24/7 with their children!** This has not been emphasized enough recently. Parents seem to be expected to integrate play into all aspects of everyday life, which is really an impossible task. We all try to stay calm and positive throughout the day, but that does not mean playing with your child nonstop.
- Before you decide to play with your child, try to ensure that the time you set aside will be **free from distractions** for you (and your child too!). Phones, computers, TV, electronics, school or work activities, or household chores should be put aside.
- You can say something like this **before** you decide to have a playtime with your child, "Amy, I have 10 minutes now (or however long you have available) that we can play together."

- **Five minutes before the end** of your playtime you would say something like, “Amy, we have five more minutes to play.” You can even give a one-minute warning as well, just to make things clear by saying something like, “We have one more minute to play.”
- Then **at the end** of the playtime you would indicate that playtime is finished and say something like, “Amy, our playtime is done for now.” Then you would carry on with whatever you need to do next.

Tip #5: Try to structure some parent-child playtimes as one-to-one playtime.

- Play between one parent and one child goes a long way in **developing a special and strong bond** between parent and child.
- This can be difficult with more than one child in a family, but it is definitely **worth the effort** of finding some opportunities to play one-to-one with your child where other children are supervised by someone else, or if old enough, engaged in another activity.

Ways you can meet your child's need for Acceptance through parent-child play:

Being accepting and respectful of your child's feelings and experiences is hugely important. When you **acknowledge and accept** your child's feelings and experiences, your child 's **sense of identify and self-esteem develops**. Parent-child playtime can provide children with opportunities to express a wide range of feelings safely, in the context of play, and in the presence of an accepting parent.

Sometimes parents forget that they can accept all of their children's **feelings and experiences** and not necessarily accept all of their children's **behaviors**. In play, children's feelings, desires and perspectives can be acknowledged and accepted by parents, even though unsafe or inappropriate behaviors are not.

Here are 3 ways you can acknowledge and accept your child's feelings and experiences:

1. **Describe** your child's play activities (as long as they are safe and nondestructive)
2. **Paraphrase** what your child tells you
3. **Identify** any feelings you notice coming up in your child

Tip #6: Acknowledge your child's feelings and experiences by describing your child's play activities, paraphrasing what your child is telling you, and identifying any feelings that come up for your child during playtime.

- For example, if you see your child is lining up cars one behind the other, you could **describe what your child is doing** by saying something like, “Now you’re lining your cars up all in a row.”
- If your child tells you that her stuffed teddy bear doesn’t like his dinner, you could **paraphrase back what your child said** by saying something like, “Oh I see, Teddy doesn’t want to eat that.”
- If you notice your child smiling and laughing when finding a toy, you could **identify your child’s feeling** of excitement by saying something like, “Wow, looks like you’re feeling excited to find that toy.”

Ways you can meet your child’s need for Encouragement through parent-child play:

Parent-child play provides many opportunities for parents to be encouraging to their children by acknowledging their children’s feelings, strengths, efforts and positive qualities. Whether it is through direct verbal **approval and reinforcement** for a job well done (“Good job putting the puzzle piece there!”), or through descriptive encouragement that focuses on a child’s **efforts** in mastering a challenging task (“You worked hard on that.”), children flourish from their parents’ approval and encouragement.

Keep in mind however, excessive and lavish verbal praise, for example when you use the words “amazing” or “incredible” or “fantastic” can be discouraging for children **if used constantly and exclusively**. Excessive praise like this often puts pressure on children and if this is the only way children can get their parents’ approval they may feel inadequate if they don’t “measure up” to the lavish praise.

Tip #7: Instead of praising your child lavishly and excessively, encourage your child by focusing on reinforcing your child’s efforts, feelings and strengths.

- For example, if your child tells you to look at a picture he just drew, instead of saying, “That’s fantastic!” you could say something like, “I can see you’ve worked really hard on your drawing. I can see a purple dog here and an orange ball right there. And you used lots of other different colours over there on that part of the page. And you added your name to the top. You’re really proud of what you did.”

Ways you can meet your child’s need for Assistance through parent-child play:

Parent-child play is not the same as when children play with their siblings or their friends. Although children gain huge benefits from playing with other children, there are unique benefits of parent-child play. As adults, parents can play in a more mature and varied manner with their children and can provide unique benefits to children in play activities.

We now know without a doubt that learning for children occurs in play. When parents are involved in children's play, they can support and guide their child in a huge variety of ways that will enhance their children's total development.

One thing to keep in mind, however, when you are guiding and supporting your child is that you don't want to step in too early and take over for your child. You do want to give your child opportunities to problem-solve and to do things for him or herself. On the other hand, you also don't want to let your child struggle excessively without your support.

Tip #8: When your child is struggling with a challenging task or with deciding what to do, encourage, support and guide him or her by providing just enough assistance so that your child can complete the task or continue with the activity.

- If you see your child struggling to put together some blocks, you can initially support your child by acknowledging your child's difficulties by saying something like, "It looks like that's really tough for you to get those blocks together."
- You could also say something encouraging to your child that focuses on his or her efforts by saying something like, "You're working really hard trying to put them together."
- When your child continues to struggle with something, you can guide and support your child by providing just enough help to your child so he or she can continue on with the activity, by saying something like, "Here ... you could try putting this smaller block on first before you put the bigger one on."

Ways you can meet your child's need for Independence through parent-child play:

Parent-child play is an excellent way to encourage your child to explore and to make his or her own choices and decisions. This gives your child opportunities to learn about the world and is so important for children in order to help them develop their sense of independence and self-confidence.

Tip #9: Don't step in too quickly to tell your child what to do or not do, but rather allow your child opportunities to make his or her own choices and decisions during playtime.

- If it is safe and appropriate, you can encourage your child to make a choice by saying something like, "You can choose how to do it." or "You can decide what that is."
- If your child decides to do something **unsafe or destructive**, you would step in and redirect your child to safe and non-destructive activities.

- Whenever it is safe and appropriate, allow your child to experience **natural consequences** during the playtime. This means you accept your child's decision and allow whatever is going to happen to happen, even if you would have made a different decision.
 - For example, you are watching your child build a tower with blocks and you can see it is not stable and will likely fall over if another block is put on top. You resist the temptation to tell your child not to put another block on top because the tower will fall over, and instead you say, as she is putting the block on top of the tower, something like, "Now it looks like you've decided to put that block on the very top." Then, if the tower does fall over, you would say something like, "Oh, the tower fell!" If your child gets upset, you would then identify your child's feelings by saying something like, "You're mad the tower fell over." Children learn from natural consequences.

Ways you can meet your child's need for Structure and Limits through parent-child play:

Providing structure and limits to children is something that all parents understand is important. There are many books and resources dedicated to improving children's behaviors. Although parents will be limiting children's inappropriate behaviors generally throughout the day in real life, parents can also limit children's inappropriate behaviors in playtime as well, and this can be very important for consistency in handling children's behaviors. Parent-child playtime is a good opportunity for parents to use their limit-setting skills because it is in the context of an enjoyable and positive experience.

However, just remember that it is best during parent-child playtime to not have too many rules and limitations, as this can put a damper on the positive experience you are seeking with your child. Don't forget to **set up your play area** so it is safe and child-friendly (see Tip #1).

Tip #10: Limit unsafe, destructive, or inappropriate behaviors you notice your child doing or about to do during your playtime.

- When you notice your child is doing, or is about to do, something unsafe or inappropriate, **set the limit and tell your child clearly** that this behavior is inappropriate. ("Ouch, that hurts when you throw hard things like that car. Hard things are not to be thrown.")
- You can repeat setting the limit by **acknowledging your child's feelings**. ("I know you are feeling angry that the wheel came off, but no throwing the car.")
- You can also **redirect** your child to a more appropriate behavior. ("You may not throw the car, but you can throw this foam ball.")
- If your child continues with the inappropriate behavior, provide your child with a **warning of a consequence**. ("Remember I told you that hard things like that car can't be thrown. If you

decide to throw that car again, I will put that car away for today so you won't be able to play with it.")

- The next time your child repeats the inappropriate behavior after you have given a warning, you would **enforce the consequence**. ("Remember I told you that if you threw that car again, I would put that car away. Since you chose to throw the car again, I am putting the car away for today." Then you follow through by putting the car away.)

Conclusion

Parent-child play can be enjoyable for parents as well as children. And you don't need to do it for hours at a time! Sometimes 10 or 15 minutes of playtime with your child can be achieved easier than devoting one or two hours trying to focus specifically on playing with your child. Although playing for 30 minutes or longer at one time with your child is also important, and would ideally happen once per week, shorter periods of parent-child play that are more frequent are highly desirable also.

Try using some of the above tips over the next few weeks and notice anything different in the way you and your child play together. How are things easier or harder for you? For your child? Are you noticing anything different in your lives outside of playtime?

Please remember, the above tips are not meant to make you feel stressed or discouraged, rather they are meant to support you to enjoy time spent with your child. Happy Playing!

Best,

Kathy

Pacific Spirit Play Resources

