

Play: An Important Job for You and Your Child

Too often, adults think of playtime as frivolous and just-for-fun. In fact, playing with your child is one of the most important things you can do to help him or her learn.

Play is how children develop communication skills, learn social skills like sharing and considering others' feelings, and build a bank of experiences to help them solve problems and deal with conflict. Moreover, play is a time for you to build a bond with your child and help him or her create important feelings of competence and self-worth.

Resist What's "Right"

Playtime is really the only time when your child has the freedom to explore and learn without lots of rules and restrictions. It is okay for trees to be purple, for dolphins to dress up as doctors, and for beds to go in the kitchen of a dollhouse. This freedom allows your child to exercise his or her imagination, and ultimately develop the ability to think independently.

Allow play to happen at your child's pace, and take cues from your child when offering up new activities. Remember that children take more time to learn and to move from one idea to the next. Remember, too, that your participation, encouragement and positive feedback are critical to helping your child play and learn.

Offer Positive Feedback

Indeed, your positive encouragement will help your child continue learning and growing. "Your tree is purple! How neat!" will encourage your child to keep exploring and help build his or her self-confidence. If you respond instead with, "Trees aren't purple, silly!" your child will be wary of exploring and experimenting.

Encourage your child through statements rather than through questions. Simply stating, "Wow! You put the pink bed in the kitchen of the dollhouse!" teaches your child how to communicate and reinforces things he or she already knows, like colors, names of objects, numbers, etc.

Avoid Competition

Playing with your child may be fun for you, but be careful not to upstage your child. Remember, your child will not be able to color as perfectly, complete a puzzle as quickly or follow game rules as easily as you. Let your child take the lead, and offer your praise and encouragement.

Setting Limits

Sometimes your child may begin to act inappropriately while playing. Some minor behavior can be ignored, and often indicate that your is ready to move to something else. Try switching to a new activity. When behaviors become destructive, like throwing toys, it is time to stop playtime. Simply state, "When you throw your toys, we have to stop playing."

Remember, your child is learning and growing every day! Playing with your child is one of the most important things that you can do to encourage learning and growth. Have fun!

Content is adapted from *The Incredible Years: A Trouble-Shooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 2-8 Years* by Dr. Carolyn Webster-Stratton.