

Purposeful Play

CHILD LEADS

Set a timer for a designated time period where your child leads the play while you watch, narrate and communicate delight! You can start with half an hour a week or 10-15 minutes a day. You can include motor toys like nerf toys, balls, blocks, obstacle course items, or imagination toys (see symbolic play). This strengthens a child's trust and safety and can increase their ability to play alone because they practice providing the creativity. It improves cooperation as kids feel seen and valued.

SYMBOLIC PLAY

Use props, blocks, stuffed animals, puppets, dolls, small figures, Legos, doctor kit, vehicles, art supplies, Play-Doh, or dress-up clothes to engage your child around experiences that might be difficult to have a conversation about, i.e., feelings about a new sibling, struggles at school, fear of the dentist, etc. You can use toys to act out a scenario similar to the challenging experience and let your child take over the storyline, or you can pretend to be a character in the scenario. This is especially good for helping children heal from trauma or learn wise choice-making in various situations.

NONSENSE PLAY

Make silly mistakes (put a sock on your child's ear, draw someone with three arms), or have exaggerated, big emotions or pretend conflicts. Make up a silly song that expresses a child's frustration with something. Objects talk, and even fingers can have conversations with the child. Great for reducing perfectionism in kids, as mistakes prompt laughter. Decreases stress and increases cooperation.

PURSUIT PLAY

Separate and pursue your child in various ways - peekaboo, chase, tag, hide and seek, look for a child as you pretend you can't see them. Wildly celebrate finding or catching your child. Two people each tug on the arm and argue over who gets to be with the child. Good for attachment, connection, and helping separation anxiety or trauma. It communicates, "I want you! You are delighted in!"

POWER REVERSAL PLAY

Play the silly, clumsy, confused, or frightened adult. Fall down when you chase kids or let them knock you down with a pillow, be terrified when they are a fierce animal or pretend you need them to protect or guide you. Imitate whatever your child does (be careful to be light-hearted, not mocking); or follow their commands, i.e., let kids lead Simon Says, pretend to be a robot they command, roleplay a silly situation, and ask their advice. Create scenarios where your child is the hero or saves the day in the face of some threat as you follow their orders. Great for building confidence and security in anxious or timid kids, it decreases power struggles with strong-willed kids because they enjoy fun "delegated power" without defiance.



REGRESSION PLAY

This can restore connection from a missed opportunity for early bonding. Feed, rock, sing lullabies, or do baby talk with your child as your child acts like a baby (or just younger than they are.) Because kids are given permission to act younger and are loved when they do it, it decreases jealousy and aggression toward a younger sibling and reduces manipulative helplessness or baby talk.

PHYSICAL CONNECTION

Give zooming fly-by kisses, snuggle, play wrestle, hand-clapping (“patty-cake”) games, fist bumps, piggyback rides which child directs, “dancing on Dad,” play Sardines, squish child between two parents. “Accidentally” fall on top of your child, fall “asleep,” and they work to get out from under you. Communicates safety and “I like to be close to you.”

TEAMWORK

Play as a team, take turns building something, make an obstacle course, be an assembly line to empty the dishwasher, or alternate words or lines when telling a story. Kids gang up against parent(s) in a Nerf gun or newspaper ball fight. Serve others together. Teamwork builds unity between siblings and cooperation in general.

LISTENING AND SELF-CONTROL

Practice these skills in games like Simon Says, Red Light - Green Light, [Statues](#), “Captain May I?”, Freeze, Slow-motion - Fast-motion. Notice and affirm any success.