

Supercharging Playtime

Having fun together is an important part of the parent-child relationship. These days can be hard to find 1-on-1 time with your child, so we want that time to be as powerful as possible. Using the tips below takes practice, but they can help you take full advantage of the special time you have with your child. This helps your child value your attention and approval, enhancing the parent-child bond and providing a foundation for other discipline strategies.

Things to Avoid During Play

- ***Too many instructions*** – Following instructions can be hard work for kids, and we want play to be as fun as possible. While giving instructions is very important most of the time, during play it's good to try and avoid them.
- ***Too many questions*** – As adults, we tend to ask kids a lot of questions. Sometimes it's hard for them to answer those questions, even if it's just about what they want to do. Since answering questions can be tough work, try to limit them during 1-on-1 play.
- ***Too much criticism or correction*** – Because kids love your attention so much, reacting a lot to little things they do that are annoying or disruptive can actually make them misbehave more. It's better to ignore minor misbehaviors and draw attention to the things you like.
- ***Low energy*** – Being a parent can be exhausting, so it's no surprise it can be hard to act excited for play sometimes, but when parents have low energy, it can send the message that play isn't fun or interesting to them.

What to Do During Play

- ***Describe your child's appropriate behavior*** – Focus on positive behaviors that your child is doing and simply verbally describe those (e.g., "You're driving the car around the street", "You're coloring a flower with the blue crayon"). This shows interest in your child's activity and helps develop positive skills.
- ***Follow the child's lead*** - Imitate your child's good behavior by playing along. For example, if your child is playing with the cars, you should as well. ***Avoid*** doing better than your child (e.g., building a better tower, drawing a prettier picture). This allows the child to stay in the lead and shows your interest in the child's activities.
- ***Let the little things go*** – If your child does something a little irritating like talking too loudly or tossing a toy, try to just ignore it. It's better to focus your attention on something positive.
- ***Praise and Enthusiasm*** - Provide specific, positively stated statements about good behavior (e.g., "You're doing a great job playing quietly" or "I like the way you are sharing with me"). This teaches your child what they are doing is appropriate.
- ***Have fun!*** – If you are having a good time, your child probably will too. Pick activities that both of you are likely to enjoy.

Other Tips

- **Select a time each day for playtime:** This is helpful for children because they come to expect and look forward to this positive experience. Play time should occur despite your child being in trouble that day. In fact, it is even more important to have the time on those days, because it shows your child that you still care and can focus on the good things that s/he does.
- **Identify activities to do during playtime:** Select 3-5 interactive toys/games that you and your child can use play. Select toys that your child enjoys, that encourage interaction, and that are unlikely to lead to misbehavior.
 - a. **Activities to avoid:** Guns, “rough-housing” (e.g., wrestling), watching television, homework, army figurines, video games, games with complicated rules, games that you know promote difficulties for your child
 - b. **Activities to consider:** Drawing, building blocks, Lego’s, tinker toys; for older children, perhaps also card games, board games, playing catch

Think about your child’s interests and abilities, if you have the toys or can buy some new ones, and if you can do the activity in a meaningful way in 15 minutes. Also, consider setting aside these games/activities for use *only* during special time. This will keep them more interesting and novel. Finally, consider rotating in new activities from time to time.

- **Setting of playtime:** Pick a place where there are few distractions and is away from other people in the house. Sitting at the dining room table, in a den, or other similar place works well.

Once you have selected the time and place for playtime, as well as the toys/games to be used, you are ready to begin. This time should last about **15 minutes each day, every day**. Although at first you might be tempted to go longer, if you are using the above-described skills often it will be tiring for you to go much longer than 15 minutes on a regular basis. Instead, shoot for consistent, frequent use of the time.

Please note that resources such as this are intended to offer guidance and suggestions. However, no claim is made that the information provided is appropriate for any specific child or family. Many families will find this information helpful and sufficient for addressing child rearing issues. Others will not. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's pediatrician or seek help from a mental health professional if needed.