

Child's Play

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Life is busy.

You go to work, clean the house, manage the bills, go shopping, do laundry, cook, maintain adult relationships - and then suddenly look down to see that little boy or girl looking up at you with a toy in their hand and a hopeful look on their face.

Yes, it's true - sometimes the last thing you want to do is to play with your child, no matter how much you love them or want to spend time with them. Children, of course, have a seemingly endless supply of energy. But, the stress of daily life can take a toll on your parenting skills, and can leave you feeling drained and exhausted – and summoning up the enthusiasm to play might be the last thing on your to-do list.

The fact is, playing with your child is the best way for you both to feel connected - not only by playing with toys and games, but also in many other ways. Play is instrumental in a child's world, and the more you incorporate it into your life with them, the better it is for both of you.

Play – on your child's terms

Although initially it might be difficult, set aside at least a half an hour a day to play with your child - on *their* terms. Try not to take control of the activity. Let them be the leader for awhile, and allow them to tell you about the game and how you should play it. Listen carefully and try to follow their lead. At first, you might feel a little self-conscious about playing with them – that's okay. You'll loosen up when you see how happy they are that you're down on the floor spending time with them. And afterwards, you'll notice how much closer you each feel to one another.

Adopt a playful attitude

Incorporate playfulness into other aspects of your daily life with them. For example, if you're getting angry or frustrated because they're not picking up their toys, find a playful way to tell them how you feel (rather than raising your voice). Sing out what you want in a loud, operatic voice, as in, "Joey, please go pick up your toys right nowwww! If you don't, I'll sing some more, and then you'll be sorrriyyyyy!" Joey will start to laugh,

maybe you'll start laughing, too, and the angry moment is diminished. And Joey, in all likelihood, will pick up his toys.

Play out their problems and fears

By playing with your child, you can also help her solve an upsetting problem. For example, if she's having trouble with another child who is pushing her, try and act out the scene with her. Do this in a playful way, without any kind of significance attached to it. Say, "Hey, you pushed me!" and fall over on the floor. Small children love it when you pretend to fall, and will most likely ask you to do it over and over again.

Make sure you keep the moment light and fun, and if your child wants to talk about the problem, take a break and sit and talk it over with her. Remember to always take your cues from your child. If she's not laughing or having fun with you, you should stop the play and talk with her, or give her a hug and a kiss. Letting her know you are there for her and that you care about her makes a big difference, in terms of her getting over the problem.

Be aware of your child's mood. If he seems sad or quiet, take a moment to be playful. Ask him if he'd like to do something with you, such as draw, or play a board game, or try to include him in your activity. If he seems interested, let him decide what you should do. Don't try and get him to reveal anything to you. If he wants to talk about something, he'll do it while you're spending time together. He might just need your attention - in which case spending time together playing will help him feel happier again. Pay attention to how he's feeling, as much as possible.

Make chores fun

If you include him in your activity, try to make it as playful as possible. If you're sweeping the floor, let the broom be a dance partner, or a microphone. While you both wash the dishes together, play with the suds (keeping the water in the sink, if at all possible)! Sometimes even the most mundane chores will seem like fun to children, even without any extra play. Young children attach no judgment to household chores, as *everything* is play to them - so if you present it as fun, they'll think it's a great game.

Some more tips...

- Try reserving a specific time everyday to spend playing with your child. Ask her when she'd like to have playtime with you, and then stick with it. She'll feel wonderful that she has that special half hour or so with you, set aside just for her.
- Make sure you "read" your child. If you get the sense that he's not in the mood to play, stop the games and sit down with him to talk - or to listen. Sometimes listening is the best thing you can do for your children.

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