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National
Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health

Parent-child play: A mental health promotion strategy for all children

Sarah Seekamp

Key Messages

- Children who have a consistently responsive and nurturing relationship with their parent*¹ typically experience better mental health, are more resilient and experience better outcomes in school and later life.
- Child-led play is an ideal way for parents to engage with their children and can strengthen relationships.
- Parents often need support to develop skills in child-led play.
- Practitioners can play an important role in promoting child-parent playtime as a mental health promotion strategy for all children.
- Practitioners can support parents to use play with their child to gain insights into their child-parent relationship, and their child's strengths and vulnerabilities.

What is this resource about?

This resource provides practical information on the use of play to strengthen child-parent relationships and promote children's mental health.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for practitioners working with families who have children aged 0–12 years, including women and men who face adversities that may impact upon their children. The use of play as described in this resource is as a mental health promotion strategy and not a therapy, so no special training is required. This resource will assist practitioners to interact with families in universal health, education and community services, including early childhood education and care professionals. It can also assist general practitioners, family support workers and child and maternal health nurses.

* The term 'parent' is used in this resource to describe all caregivers of children.



Background

Practitioners increasingly work with families who are experiencing multiple, coexisting adversities. During an extensive 2018 needs assessment conducted by the Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health, practitioners reported feeling overwhelmed or unsure of where to start when there were coexisting issues present. Practitioners said that a major challenge was supporting parents to think about the effects of their adversities on children, while not stigmatising them.

Shared child-parent play is a practical strategy that can be used to guide collaborative and child-focused practice and provide parents with agency in effectively supporting their children. Practitioners report that beginning sessions with child-led play is effective in focusing the whole session on the needs of the child.

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Benefits of play for children

Children's freedom to express themselves through play is fundamental to their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing (Ginsburg, 2007). The self-expression, connection with parents and positivity elicited from play contribute significantly to a sense of wellbeing and health and improve children's quality of life (Goldstein, 2012).

Play is also an effective way for children to negotiate their own interests and place in their broader environment, increasing confidence and resilience (Brussoni et al., 2015; Fearn & Howard, 2011). Furthermore, children whose parents regularly engage in play with them are less likely to develop mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, aggression, and sleep problems (Goldstein, 2012).

Unfortunately, the time children are spending in play is reducing across all socioeconomic groups (Ginsburg, 2007; Whitebread, 2017). Families are living with multiple stressors that can negatively impact on time for shared play. Hurried lifestyles are evident in more resourced families as they try to 'fit it all in' with children attending a range of structured adult-led activities. For other, less well-resourced families, finding regular time for play can be a challenge due to complexities in their home environment (Ginsburg, 2007). The decline in the time children and parents spend engaging in play can be explicitly linked to a rise in children's mental health difficulties (Gray, 2011).

Parent-child playtime as a strategy for mental health promotion

Child-led play is an ideal way for parents to engage with their children. It requires the parent to tune in to what their child is communicating, thinking and feeling without distraction. When parents observe or join their children in play in this way, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world through their child's eyes. This practice in taking the child's perspective can support parents to reflect on their child's experiences and needs.

When practitioners support parents in child-led play, they can begin to have rich conversations about the child's individual preferences, strengths and needs. The practitioner's 'expertness' is set aside during this process, and they can ask the parent about their hopes, strengths and concerns regarding their relationship with their child. Practitioners report that this prevents them from stepping into centred or authoritarian practice and establishes a parallel process, where parents focus on their child and practitioners are led by the needs of the parent.

Often, through this practice, parents will begin to evaluate their current relationship with their child and the need to make time for them. This can create a space

for practitioners to talk with parents about any concerns they may have relating to how their own challenges may be impacting upon their child.

Conclusion

Strong parent-child relationships are an important protective factor for child mental health. Parents engaging with their children in child-led play provide an ideal avenue for strengthening these relationships while promoting healthy child development. As parents become more aware of the benefits of child-parent play, there is an opportunity to experience some agency in supporting their children's mental health through shared play experiences.

When working with families, practitioners can:

- support child-led play and increase parents' confidence in engaging in play
- support families to identify realistic and sustainable opportunities for shared playtime
- build parents' capacities to engage in child-led play with their child
- use play as a mechanism to begin conversations about the hopes that parents have for their relationships with children and increase agency in making positive change; and
- focus on strategies that develop the resilience of children and have positive impacts on their long-term social and emotional wellbeing.



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Related resources

Parent-child play: Conversation Guide

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/parent-child-play-conversation-guide/>

Parent-child play: Practice Resource

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/parent-child-play-practice-resource/>

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