

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Parent-child play: Conversation guide



This resource compliments the practice paper ‘Parent-child play: A mental health promotion strategy for all children’.

Part one

Every family is different, and this first step is an opportunity for you to think about your experiences of play as a child and how these may influence play in your family now.

A parent’s understanding of play and role in their child’s play often reflects their own experience as a child and it can be helpful for parents to spend some time thinking about this. If your child can be involved in this conversation it is a good opportunity to hear from them about what they enjoy and if they would like to change anything about play in your family.

This section also provides the opportunity for you, your child and the practitioner to talk about the benefits of play for your family.

Your family’s play experiences and ideas

The type of play my child enjoys is:

My parents’ involvement in my play was:

I think the benefits my child might gain from their play are:

My involvement in my child’s play is:

Benefits of child-led play

Play is important for the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development and wellbeing of children. When children make their own decisions in play, they develop skills in creativity, problem-solving and decision-making. As children develop new ideas and activities, they gain a sense of achievement contributing to their positive mental health.



Child benefits of shared parent-child play

When a parent plays with their child, the child experiences their parent’s undivided attention and interest in their own ideas and activities. This powerfully contributes to a sense of connection and acceptance for the child with their parent. This strengthened connection builds emotional resilience within the child, better preparing them to manage challenges throughout their life.

“When I play with my child without distractions, I enjoy seeing how much they love having me spend time just with them. I also enjoy watching them play and seeing their creativity.”

Parent of three children 3, 5 and 8 years old

Parental benefits of shared parent-child play

Parents can deepen their understanding of their child, learning about their child’s interests and strengths. Parents who play with their children learn to communicate more effectively with them, providing opportunities for more open and effective communication. Importantly, parents can have fun playing with their children.

Part two: Getting ready for play

Many families have lost confidence in playing together due to the pressures and complexities of daily life. Sometimes parents aren't sure how to join in with their child's play. Child-led play, as described below relies on the parent following their child's lead in play. It is particularly powerful at strengthening parent-child relationships, which in turn supports children's mental health and resilience.

Developing a plan for play can help you to feel more confident and ensure more positive play experiences. This section provides information about child-led play and encourages you to think about how you could play with your child in this way.

Tips for child-led play

- Let your child choose the activity (if the child is 0-2 years old then you may offer them a few choices of toys).
- Let your child be the leader in play:
 - Watch and listen for your child's prompts as to how they want you to join in.
 - For younger children (under 3) try imitating your child's play and describing what you are seeing them do.
 - Avoid interruptions (e.g. from phones, TV's or other people).
- Show your warmth, interest and approval by smiling, using eye contact, affection, and loving comments and tone of voice.
- Things to avoid:
 - This special playtime is not a time for teaching.
 - Don't give your child advice or correct them.
- Don't multitask. For example, don't watch the news while playing with your child, or have a conversation with your partner while playing. Aim to give your child 100% of your attention.
- Don't use this shared playtime as a reward or take it away as a punishment. Offering this shared time with your child regardless of their behaviour tells them you always love them, and this is very powerful in helping them see themselves positively. (Solter, 2013)

My plan for play with my child this week

To begin playing with my child I will:

(e.g. I will ask my child if I can join their play; I will ask my child if they would like to play with me and what they would like to do)

When I play with my child I will aim to:

(e.g. I will let my child take the lead and avoid distractions like my phone, work or household chores; I will aim to keep my tone of voice patient and warm)

"It can be hard to make the time to play with your children, especially when you're a full-time worker as well as a parent, but when you do it's really magical."

Parent of two children, 2 and 4 years old

Part three: Finding time for shared child-parent play

Many parents have trouble finding the time to play with their children. It can be helpful to know that the quality of shared playtime can be more important for children than the amount of time. While 20-30 minutes is ideal, five minutes of completely undivided parent attention each day can have a big impact on how connected a child feels to their parent.

This section guides you through finding time for play and thinking about what can help make this playtime possible.

Working together to find time for play

Begin by brainstorming times when play with your child might be more possible:
(e.g. while their little sister is sleeping; just before bed; straight after school pickup or dinner)

Times for play

1. e.g. Just before bed _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

This week I will:

What do you think you could try this week? Think about when you could play, on what days, for how long. It is important to be realistic, even if this means starting small.

For example: *This week I will play with Joe on three days after school for 15 minutes each time.*

Think about:

What might get in the way of our playtime?

To overcome this, I could:

To help keep me motivated towards achieving this shared playtime I can focus on:

To help me remember to have our playtime I will:

The things/people that can help make this plan possible are:

Part four: Parent reflection – How did your shared playtime go?

This section acknowledges that when developing new routines or skills, it is not expected that something will go perfectly the first time or every time. A guide is provided for you to reflect on your playtime with your child once you have started your plan. By reflecting on how it went; what went well; and what you might need to do differently next time, you are able to learn from your experience and apply this new knowledge in the future.

Below are some prompts to help you reflect on your shared playtime with your child.

Making time for our shared play was:

(Was finding time hard? What were you able to do? For example, how many play sessions did you have this week and for how long?)

I found our play time:

(What was the experience like for you?)

I think my child found our playtime:

My child said our playtime was:

(Ask your child)

Following my child's lead in play was:

The things I did well are:

Next time I might do the following things differently:

My plan for next week is:

Delivery partners:



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