



HOW TO PLAY

A practical guide for harnessing the therapeutic power of play at home

A resource for caregivers by Dr. Chelsea Conaway, PhD, LPC



WHAT IS PLAY?

"Play is whatever works as a pleasurable, organic, and back-and-forth flow of exchanges with others under conditions of interpersonal safety" (Delahooke, 2019, pg.108). For children, play is the serious business of building the social and emotional skills necessary for navigating life stress. For caregivers, play is a window into the child's thoughts, feelings, fears, and concerns.



WHY PLAY?

Interactive play with caregivers strengthens:

- Trust and relational connection between child and caregiver
- Social skills
- Communication
- Problem solving
- Emotional and behavioral regulation
- Resilience and stress tolerance



Interactive play in the context of a safe relationship provides children the opportunity to communicate and manage difficult emotions, experiment with various feeling states and behaviors, master challenges, and work through the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that often underlie challenging behaviors. Additionally, play provides children a symbolic pathway to act out aggressive or socially unacceptable thoughts and behaviors.

PLAY AND THE BRAIN



Play is a neural exercise in that it allows children to flex the muscles of emotional and behavioral regulation. Through the process of play, children have the opportunity to experiment with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with hyperarousal (fight or flight) and hypoarousal (freeze) under conditions of safety and connection. Put simply, play allows children to exercise parts of the brain that strengthen their capacity to manage challenging feelings and behavior.



INTERACTIVE PLAY CHARACTERISTICS

Below are basic guidelines for using the therapeutic power of play at home to build on the work done in therapy. Note that interactive play with caregivers is not a substitute for professional support when such services are needed.

SAFE

Consistently provide your child with cues of safety (e.g., warm tone, relaxed body posture and facial expression, smile, laughter). Use verbal and non-verbal communication to support a relaxed and playful environment.

CONNECTED

Be fully present with your child. Minimize distractions such as television or other screens. Be engaged, interactive, and curious.

CHILD-LED

Allow your child to lead the play. Let go of any agenda or concerns. Follow your child's lead and hold space for their play themes and needs.

NON-JUDGEMENTAL

Take a non-judgmental approach to your child's play. Avoid discouraging or shaming play behaviors (e.g., "Dollhouses are for girls" or "Soldiers shooting people isn't nice"). Play is neither good nor bad. It is simply play. If concerning play behaviors arise, consult with your child's therapist or other professional. Setting limits around play that could hurt ourselves or others is okay.



PRESSURELESS

Avoid the temptation to analyze play or ask questions about hidden meanings (e.g., Does that mean tiger represents your grandpa?). Similarly, avoid the temptation to take advantage of "teaching moments" (e.g., The tiger hit the bear! What should the tiger say if he hurt someone?). Let play be play.

JOYFUL

Have fun! Connect with your spontaneous, silly inner child and bring that inner child to the playroom. The most powerful characteristic of interactive play is authentic, safe, and joyful connection.



References

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