

Tips on Being a Playful Parent



Introduction

When we talk to parents, most recognise that play is important to their children. However, in our busy lives, we as parents can feel that we don't have enough time to spend playing with our children. Unfortunately, because of this, some children and their parents are missing out.

Play between a parent and child improves the physical and mental wellbeing of both. It brings about the release of endorphins and results in shared feel good moments with emotionally connecting experiences. The release of endorphins enhances mood for both the parent and child helps them cope better with their emotions and it may also improve their general health. Activities in play can help develop a child's motor skills, prevent obesity and build emotional intelligence, creativity, social skills and improve a child's attention span.

As you see, play is not an add-on to a child's life, it is a crucial requirement for your child's health and development and helps in maintaining or improving your own health. And, it is important that playing with your child doesn't end with them reaching their pre-teen years.

Danger of social isolation

As those of us who have experienced our child reaching 8 or 9 years of age, we are aware that our child is starting to turn away from us and rely more on their friends. They go from being happily indifferent to what other children think of them to wanting to fit in, feeling upset if left out, and comparing themselves to their friends. They also can become very self-conscious about their bodies, looks and clothes and lack self-esteem more so than children in younger and older age groups.

Some parents say that their children, particularly those who feel that they are not 'fitting in', become socially isolated and find refuge in games on their phones, computers and the internet and are reluctant to play with others. For many children, their bedroom can become both a sanctuary and a prison.

Sharing play

Shared play helps develop strong family bonds which can last a lifetime. Playing with both peers and parents can improve a child's ability to plan, organise, get along with others, and regulate emotions. In addition, play helps with language, maths and social skills, and can help children cope with stress.

Persuading your child to become involved in socially interactive games and less in sedentary games such as computer or internet games can demand great patience, and an acceptance that you may suffer a few rebuffs.

Even when your pre-teenage children tell you that they don't want any help from you, they may change their mind when they realise you are interested, want to know about the game and would like to join in.

Enter into the game with an open mind and willingness to just relax, play and have fun. Play is not the means to an end. It can be a big ask – some parents struggle to even just loosen up because you have to be so serious the whole day. But, our children are begging us to snap out of it and have some fun!

What is play?

Play is described as:

- an activity that is enjoyable, engaging and active rather than passive or a chore.
- activities that are freely entered into rather than an activity that your child is directed or expected to do.
- activities that you and your child gets lost in time and reluctant to let the activity end.

It is worth noting that your child may also enjoy time playing alone whether hitting a ball against a wall or playing with toys. Like you, children may need time-out without interruptions, comments, demands or judgments. The time alone gives your child a chance to get away from social pressures and hassles and an opportunity to process things that have been happening. Finding a happy medium between your child being left to fill their time as they please and filling your child's time with structured activities can be resolved by knowing your child and taking cues from your child as to how you should proceed.

Play with pre-teens

Success in sharing games with your child requires a commitment on your part. Success will depend on your patience, your enthusiasm and particularly on your time.

Some helpful hints

- select activities that allow adults and children to become physically and emotionally close; include touch and eye contact.
- simplicity is key; play doesn't have to be elaborate or fancy.
- shared joy and enjoyment is the goal.
- focus on the "here-and-now". Don't bring up past or future challenges to talk about during play if it is not initiated by your child.
- unspoken rule – it is your role as the parent to support your children to regulate their bodies and emotions during play, not authoritarian, but playful and natural.

Join in activities your child already may do

Because the pre-teen looks towards their friends and are less interested interacting with you, you may be left out of the loop in knowing much about what your child is interested in. Because of this, you need to go more than halfway to becoming involved in their interests.

- active computer games that involve movement and exercise e.g., dance games and motion control themed games.
- sedentary computer games such as, Minecraft, Fortnite, Overcooked, Rayman and other platform games.
- sing-along and dance to popular music.
- hide and seek, sardines, tag.
- doing makeup, dress-ups, performing magic tricks or dance.
- make believe, pretend shopping, playing house.
- ball games like four square (hand ball), soccer or throwing and kicking any ball to each other.

Join in activities you as a parent already may do

Sharing your activities with your child can be fun and enjoyable particularly when you turn it into play.

- walking the dog can be fun. This might involve helping your child to teach the dog to obey commands or do tricks. Playing 'fetch' with the dog or sharing the task of bathing the dog.
- washing the car might include helping by using water guns, or on hot days, wearing bathers and creating lots of bubbles and splashing.
- helping with cooking meals and baking simple treats such as cupcakes.
- joining in gardening or helping in the backyard can be engaging and fun particularly if your child has his or her own tools and equipment so they can "work" beside you.

Both of you join in activities that neither of you may have done together.

- family game night once a week. Get agreement on which night suits everyone best, if friends can be invited. Each person takes a turn in selecting a game. These games can be board games, card games or physical contact games such as Twister, Balloon Tennis, Wheelbarrow Race, Musical Chairs, All elbows and other physical games you decide on e.g., everyone wears socks and sits on the floor; try to get socks off the others but keeping yours on.
- other family games can be inside or outside depending on the weather such as table tennis. Outside games can involve contact sport as in hide and seek, soccer, footy and rugby.
- playing with your dog – creating an agility course, throwing a frisbee, tug of war, teach your dog to chase bubbles or tricks.
- completing a jigsaw puzzle as a family. Look in your cupboards for your family favorites or swap out with friends or other family members.

This tip sheet provides general information and is not intended to be a substitute for professional support. Please reach out for support if you are worried about you or your child.

Useful Links

<https://www.playfulparenting.com/>

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens>

<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/age-6-12>

https://emergingminds.com.au/?gclid=EAlaIqobChMI5NGVmskU6glV1iMrCh1zDg2EEAAYASAAEgJFLPD_BwE

<https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/category/parenting/#gs.8i3r14>

<https://www.heysigmund.com/playful-parenting-better-brains-10-tools/>