

The Adult Role in Child-led Play – How to Become a Learning Ally

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‘Child-led Play’ is where the child follows their own play urges. It does not refer to the play during which the adult follows the child, or to play during which the child follows the adult.

We live in a time where there are play experts. People who are concerned with the lack of play and are working hard to get children engaged in play. Why? Because play has a very large role in how the human brain develops.

In fact, every child’s brain-development-work is done through play. Play provides the brain building blocks that will set them up for the rest of their life. In this formative time of their lives, children gather information about the world, master the use of their bodies, learn social skills and pick up every little detail to do with fitting into the culture that surrounds them.

The current crisis around children's physical, mental and intellectual health is brought about because today’s children have limited playtime. Previous generations of children disappeared on their own, in groups for hours and hours of uninterrupted play, but the world has changed for our children. Whether they are at school, after-school activities, in front of screens or being directed around the playground, this new generation is not getting enough uninterrupted child-led play, and this is cause for great concern.

Many people believe that children are around three years old before can safely play unassisted, before they will be in control of their bodies enough to not hurt themselves, and be in control of their emotions enough to not hurt or be picked on by peers. Unfortunately for many children, many adults do not understand that it is the uninterrupted play itself that grows the very qualities they are waiting for - and long before a child's third year. Because play and development go hand in hand, your baby starts on their road to development through play from the moment they start moving.

All parents want the best for their children. When we hear the message from these play experts, on the seriousness of this lack of play for our child’s future, we are left wondering ‘what can we do?’.

“Decades of research has shown that play is crucial to physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development at all ages. This is especially true of the purest form of play: the unstructured,

self-motivated, imaginative, independent kind, where children initiate their own games and even invent their own rules.” Dr. David Elkind

So What Can We Do About This With Our Children?

As adults and guardians of these young 'learning sponges', it is our job as a 'learning ally' to –

- offer a safe learning environment
- let them follow their own play urges
- support them without interrupting
- watch and wait as they discover, invent and explore

Offer a Safe Learning Environment

Where to start? – Start on the lap. You are your child's 'safe ground'. Your arms are where they feel most safe. All children have their own built in readiness-meter, they will leave your lap when they feel safe and feeling safe is paramount for optimum learning.

Your baby will be relaxed and looking around signalling when she is ready to leave your lap and be placed on her back on the mat in front of you. You can assist by placing light and easy to hold objects beside them to reach, objects just right for exploring.

An older child will decide when to leave your lap to explore and move independently. Children work out and sum up any new situation before engaging with it. With this in mind, please allow your child/children as much time as it takes for them to feel comfortable to engage in play.

Let Them Follow Their Own Play Urges

Let your baby search and engage with the object of their interest rather than you shaking an object in front of her face or placing it into her hand. In place of an object, your baby may find the tree canopy mesmerizing, or their hands or feet.

The exhilaration of discovery is something we can all identify with. In order for babies and children to discover climbing or what wet leaves smell like, a learning ally takes a step back to let them discover for themselves. When your child feels like climbing, or finding acorns in the undergrowth, it is their curiosity that is driving their wonder and learning.

You become a learning ally when you understand your child needs to direct their own explorations. The more you stand back and enjoy observing their deep play concentration, their independent play ability increases. Babies and children who are allowed uninterrupted play-time are less likely to learn what 'boredom' is - they develop creativity, imagination and a concentration span that they take with them to adulthood.

Support Them Without Interrupting

There are many ways you can offer support to your child when they are playing; Your presence is the most important support as their 'safe-ground'. As long as they can see you, and as long as they know they can reconnect with you when they want to, they feel safe enough to play and learn.

Your face is their radar screen, they look to you for a read-out on each situation. Your expressions let your child know if this experience is 'positive or negative'.

You know when your child or someone else's child is stretching their physical skills, and you can stand in close enough 'in case'.

When you support this in this way, you do not have to hover next to them, you will be able to maintain the greatest amount of support with the least interruption by actively observing.

Wait and Observe As They Discover, Invent and Explore

Some things take time when you are learning, or when you are still perfecting the use of your body, so instead of jumping in to put a name to the creature they have in their hand or to lift them up where they need to persevere with acquiring climbing skills, wait.

By standing back, observing and waiting to see what unfolds for the person doing the learning, we are able to support our children in play without interrupting their development.

Observing is one of the key tools for a learning ally. Through observation you are able to step back and keep the connection needed to support without interrupting, without neglecting. As long as you can see them and they can see you when they look up you have created a solid base for support.

Do Not Disturb – Brain In Development!

No one can do the learning for another person, it is not possible. Because play is all about learning and development for the person who is doing the playing, the experience is a personal thing.

A great deal of concentration and focus is required in play - whether it is exploring an object, repeating a physical manoeuvre or trying new social interaction skills in a group. This concentration, action and the learning is led, performed and held by the person playing, they are busy at work developing before our very eyes.

As learning allies we honour the space required for this personal learning experience by not interrupting play unless we are invited to by the child – in which case we take the passive role - or when we must intervene due to safety issues.

Exploratory Play – You cannot explore or gather information for your child or her growing brain, so *please do not interrupt your child when they are busy, allow your child uninterrupted play.*



Repetitive Play – Doing a move or action over and over again is how we master it, we cannot master it for ourselves if someone helps us. Likewise you cannot master any skill or action for your child so *please do not interrupt your child when they are busy, allow your child uninterrupted play.*

Physical Play – It is impossible to use your body and master your own balance when someone is holding your hands or shifting you around. You cannot learn balance for your child so *please do not interrupt your child when they are busy, allow your child uninterrupted play.*



Role-play – The 'play' can often require actors to fill various roles. This is when you are most likely to be invited by request into your child's world of play. On the other hand you might not have a role in the play at all and if you are not invited *please do not interrupt your child when*

they are busy, allow your child uninterrupted play.

Imaginary Play – Conjuring up ‘images’ for imaginary play comes from within and is based on your child’s experience and information gathered during exploratory play. Your child is pulling up the image files and creating a ‘new play’. You cannot do this for your child by projecting your own images so *please do not interrupt your child when they are busy, allow your child uninterrupted play.*



Creative Play – Making up new rules, ideas and creations are inspirational sparks in the brain. You cannot create these sparks for your child so *please do not interrupt your child when they are busy, allow your child uninterrupted play.*

When we take a closer look at how personal play is for every child, it becomes obvious that there is rarely an adult role in children’s play.

"It is essential that the child discovers himself as much as possible. If we help him to solve every problem we deprive him of exactly what his mental development is most important." Dr Emmi Pikler

So What Is Our Role As The Learning Ally In Our Children’s Play?

We sit with our children until they are ready to leave our laps and play.

We provide inspiring learning environments where there are multipurpose landscapes and open-ended objects that facilitate our developing child’s play needs.

We make sure that children have appropriate clothing, especially for outdoor conditions. Always remain open to the possibility of ‘less’ when children request barefoot and seek opportunity to get dirty.

Blood sugar and liquid levels need to be maintained for everyone to function at their best.

If invited to join the play, take the passive role and follow the children's lead and suggestions because it is their play.

We sit quietly and observe our children at play, careful not to break their concentration. They will glance at us if they need reassurance. When we limit our involvement to eye contact and facial expressions we meet their needs for 'safety with backup' without interrupting their play and discovery.

If we need to break the silence we choose respectful language so as not pass judgment or interrupt their flow of development too much. A calm tone of voice and clear descriptions of what it is you are informing the person concentrating in play.

If you see a potential safety, conflict or violent situation developing, move in calmly and quietly. Your calm presence is often enough reassurance for the child trying something new. Move in quickly to prevent any unwanted physical contact in conflict or in potential fall situations.

Everyone Wins

There are benefits for both sides when we become learning allies for our children. Our children get that important uninterrupted play time to develop to their full potential, unfold their brains and bodies and reach milestones in their own time.

They also get to grow more confident in their own abilities and trust their own instincts, become aware of their capabilities, judge how far to stretch their own abilities, and let them hone their powers of judgment around risk.

You have the pleasure and privilege of watching your child interact with others, be immersed in their own activities, accomplish physical tasks unaided and become an independent self-confident being.

They are able to follow their own urges and interests and develop lengthy attention spans, leaving behind the need to be entertained and a whole host of other benefits, a list too long to draw.

Becoming a learning ally and gifting your child the chance to play uninterrupted creates a circle of trust. As you learn to trust your child managing their own capabilities, you begin to feel more comfortable with stepping back and trusting in their ability. Through observation we can sit silently and peacefully at a distance without being negligent or interrupting. A win-win situation.

"Athletes call it The Zone, researchers call it Flow. Children call it Play. This state is the essence of real intelligence and creativity." Michael Mendizza

Play Is Important For All

Play is important for everyone; from young babies to grandparents, best friends, to brothers and sisters. Finding time and space to create and discover by yourself, or to team up with friends for laughter and games are all important. As we move through developmental stages our play changes along the way, we all have a need to play regardless of our age.

It is part of our job as parents of the next generation to honour this time of play for our children, to provide for them the space to create and discover by themselves and with others - for it is this time that they are busy developing their growing brains, mapping out their world through play.

Take a step back and observe your child at play.