

The Healing Power of Family Play

By *Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D.*

Many years ago I happened upon a magical island in the Mediterranean where families from all parts of Europe took their holidays. The beaches have the warmest, clearest aqua waters, there are fascinating prehistoric “taula” ruins sprinkled about, and the old towns take me back to a charming other time. I’ve been fortunate to return almost every year, except the last four while intensely writing and sharing my book with the world. So when I was able to return this past summer, I was struck by the delightful healing possibilities of family play.

Across the island beaches so many languages were spoken, it was hard to keep up. My Spanish was not close enough to Italian, my basic French was barely similar to Catalan, and I’m lost for German and Dutch. Even the English accents were difficult to decipher. Not understanding what the families around me were saying proved perfect. Because I could only observe the interactions of the families—their faces, movements, joy, laughter—without the distraction of words, I could focus on perhaps an even deeper communication.

I saw a giant, gentle German bringing his hesitant 3-year-old into the waves, sharing the excitement of the unexpected while keeping him safe. Sitting nearby, an Italian mom tenderly rubbed sunscreen on her little girl’s back. In a secluded cove, a French father played “chef de cuisine” with his 9-year-old daughter. Carefully and slowly, the little girl made *sand* crepes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, while her dad patiently waited and gratefully accepted her masterpiece meals. Other families built sand castles, complete with moats and bridges as if they were building an amazing architectural wonder. And the teens were jumping off high cliffs into the sea below.

But what I noticed most was that the families were happy. They were in the moment, totally loving and enjoying each other. There was nary a video game to be found. Their two or three weeks of fun in the sun allowed a balance to their busy lives back home. But for how long? I realized the importance of sharing family playtime...all year. No hidden agenda, nothing to learn or teach. Just have fun.

So, consider making a commitment to your family’s playtime happiness. Remember:

Discover what works for your family:

Pillow fights? Finger paints? Trampoline jumps? Staring at the stars? Camping in the backyard? Tickle contests? Your family is unique—brainstorm together.

Make it a ritual:

Whether it’s 30 minutes each day, two hours on a Saturday afternoon, or even once a

month on a Sunday, create a playtime routine to look forward to. Mark it on your calendar.

Be Spontaneous:

Grab playtime whenever you can. Spontaneity is wonderful and not just for once or twice a year.

Focus on fun rather than competition:

You're all on the *same* team. It's too easy for games to turn into sibling rivalry. Change the rules—don't keep score. Make laughter your goal.

Be consistent:

It's easy to put off family fun, but don't. Calls can be returned in an hour. Work will be there tomorrow. You brush your teeth every day, don't you? Why not make fun a priority. It'll hold you when the stress sets in.

About the Author

Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D. is a child educational psychologist, an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at UCLA, and author of the Los Angeles Times bestselling book, "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success" (Perigee/Penguin). In addition to her private practice, she creates therapeutic relaxation CDs for children, teens, and parents, and teaches workshops internationally on the healing power of children's imaginations. You can find out more about her at www.ImageryForKids.com.