

How to Play with Your Child

Tammi Van Hollander, LCSW, RPT

Playing with your child sounds easy enough but something may get in the way. You may feel that your child does not want you to play with them. They may become frustrated and irritated and feel intruded upon. You may think your child does better alone and any of your suggestions are quickly rejected. Many of these reactions are common because parents can obstruct a child's play by taking over or turning it into a teaching lesson. I have undergone years of training in client-centered play therapy to truly understand the skill of play. So here are some suggestions on engaging your child in play:

- Set up a regular time to play with your child, such as thirty minutes every Sunday morning
- Give your child your undivided attention: Turn off your phone, television, and computer, and dedicate this time for your child
- Follow your child's lead
- Sit at the same level as your child (floor is best)
- Stay in imagination (do not talk about what they want for dinner during the play)
- Respect your child's need for silence
- Join your child's story and stick with the play topic
- Match child's intensity (if they are loud, you be loud, if they whisper, you whisper)
- Reflect what your child is saying and what you see, without obstructing the play
- Ask questions like: "What's happening?"
- Have your child direct you by asking them what you should say

and what they want your character/toy to do. For example, if you're playing kitchen with your child and your child gives you a pretend ice cream cone, whisper, "Do I like it?" We cannot assume that your child wants you to like it in their play. If they say, "You don't like it" then respond, "Yuck, I don't like it." Giving your child control during this special playtime will help build your child's confidence and self-esteem.

By following the above suggestions, your children will feel empowered to play out what they need to play out. It may be a concern when there is violence or negative themes in your child's play, but you need to understand that they are working out their problems from within. By trusting the play process and by letting your child fully direct their play, you will be taken into a magical world of your child's imagination.

Believe me, it can be quite a trip! Just be their passenger and let them lead you into this imaginative world. Have fun and enjoy the ride!

About the Author

Tammi Van Hollander, LCSW, RPT, is a licensed clinical social worker and Registered Play Therapist who has worked with children and families since 1990. She has presented numerous workshops throughout the United States on play therapy and sand tray therapy to teachers, parents, students, and clinicians. She currently practices at the Center for Psychological Services in Ardmore, Pennsylvania, specializing in young children, trauma, anxiety, ADHD, and sensory processing disorder.

All rights reserved. © 2011 Tammi Van Hollander