

## How to Play with Your Kiddo

by Charissa Fry, Licensed Professional Counselor, Registered Play Therapist

When kids have a bad day, they ask, “Will you play with me?” instead of telling you about the bad day. Play is the language and work of children. When kids need to process or make sense of the world, they play rather than talk it out. Play helps children name, understand, and manage emotions. Play helps children practice social behaviors, like sharing power/taking turns. Play also helps children understand why others act and treat them in different ways (Example: A child might play out a bullying scenario to make sense of how it feels to be the bully or see how others respond when they play out the bully.). Play also helps a child regulate their nervous system. When a child is in play mode, they feel safe, competent, and in control. Play is not a reward or a privilege, it is a developmental necessity. Children who don’t receive enough time to free play or cooperatively play, may end up stressed, angry, and depressed.

Schedule 10-15 minutes of Special Play Time with your child a few times a week or anytime a child starts acting out or getting uncooperative. Special Play Time is the highest quality time you can spend with your child and gets the best results in a short amount of time. Special Play Time should never be used as a reward or taken away as a punishment. In fact, the more acting out behaviors you are experiencing from a child, the more the child is signaling they need quality connection with you to get back to a regulated state where they can be cooperative, thoughtful, and exercise self-control. You will also see an improvement in your relationship with your kiddo and improvement in their self-esteem.

### Tips for Special Play Time

1. Avoid questions. Questions disrupt the flow of play. When a child is doing deeper work through play and experiencing the moment, questions pull the child out of the experience and into their logic/reason part of the brain. By stopping the play and requiring a child to use the thinking part of their brain, the ability to experience, feel, process, and integrate life experiences is shut down or impaired.
2. Avoid giving commands or correcting behaviors. This takes the lead from the child. The child experiences a loss of being fully immersed in the play and connection with the parent. Instead the child might go into fight/flight/freeze because they feel scared of the parents response to them or shame at their behavior. The fight/flight/freeze response disconnects us from relationship, safety, and joy.
3. Ignore inappropriate behavior. Unless there is danger or destruction, a child can practice or get out behaviors that are normally not allowed. This provides a safe outlet to practice something a child might be trying to process or work through. This also allows a child to feel unconditionally accepted and loved. When a parent focuses on positive behaviors, the desired behaviors are praised and reinforced for the child.
4. Use the whisper technique. If you absolutely must ask a question during Special Play Time, use the whisper technique. Instead of pausing the play or asking a question in a normal voice, whisper your question instead. This clues the child that you need some direction to keep

following them but you are still letting them lead and still fully engaged in the story they are acting out.

5. Engage in the ridiculous, gross, or scariness. Children need play to process all their life experiences. If a child experiences a death, they might need to play out dying or a funeral to understand it. If a child loves to talk about poop but is continually shut down regarding “potty talk” then allowing a child to play out a story involving poop helps them not feel shame or shut down about normal human experiences. If a child is scared of monsters, by playing out a monster game, the child can gain power over the monster and feel more empowered for the future. In a child’s world, anything is possible. When we allow a child to lead and rabbits can fly or kids have special super powers, we encourage creativity, problem solving, wonder, delight, and empowerment.
6. Avoid teaching or insisting on obedience. Take off your teacher and parent hat during Special Play Time. You are here to have fun, be silly, and follow your child’s lead. All the other time you spend with your child you are teaching and parenting. Allow 10-15 minutes of something different during Special Play Time. Children are able to distinguish between the rules or differences in Special Play Time and the rest of the day.
7. Don’t name objects or guess at what something is being used for. Rather than answering a child’s question of “What is this?” respond with, “During Special Play Time, you get to choose!” Instead of guessing what an object is used for, let the child lead with creativity, imagination, and flexibility. Example: Child grabs an oven mitt. Parent: Oh, we are going to cook! Child: No, this is my puppet Mr. Snake
8. If you make a wrong guess while narrating or reflecting during Special Play Time, your child will correct you. Then repeat what they just said and keep following their lead.

## Keys to Special Play Time

Skill	Result	Examples
FOLLOW the child's lead	> Increase child's sense of competence	Child: We are going to play ninjas!
	> Allows child to feel seen, heard, understood, and delighted in	Parent: You choose to play ninjas with me. I love playing with you.
	> Shares power with the child in an appropriate way	
	> Models cooperation	
REFLECT the child's words and actions	> Allows child to lead	Child: [Flaps arms and crows]
	> Child knows you are listening and present	Parent: You are a bird! I see your wings flapping and hear your crowing.
	> Strengthens communication skills	Child: I am making a sword.
	> Prevents miscommunication	Parent: I see your sword!
	> Child feels understood or can clarify misunderstandings	
MATCH the energy and tone of the child	> Shows engagement of parent	Child: *whispers* We are being sneaky.
	> Child feels empowered and validated	Parent: *whispers* We are being so quiet and sneaky.
	> Child feels seen and connected to parent	Child: *yells* On guard! Prepare to fight to the death!
	> Models attunement which makes children feel deeply known and understood	Parent: *yells* I'm ready for battle!
MIRROR the child's play	> Child feels competent	Child: I'm feeding my baby.
	> Child feels empowered and validated	Parent: I am giving my baby a bottle too.
	> Parent models desired cooperative behavior	Child: I am hiding the treasure.
	> Parent models desired ability to follow another person's requests	Parent: I am finding a good place to hide my treasure too.
	> Imitation communicates approval and acceptance	
	> Parent shows engagement	
	> Lets child lead and parent follow	

Skill	Result	Examples
NARRATE the child's play	> Child feels seen and connected to parent	Child: *Farmer feeds the chickens*
	> Child feels delighted in	Parent: The farmer is taking such good care of the animals. She knows just what they need.
	> Parent shows engagement and interest	Child: *Character unsure of what to do next*
	> Organizes a child's thoughts	Parent: He is having trouble deciding what to do. He is confused.
	> Puts words to the child's experience	Child: *Playing with doll house*
	> Teaches without disrupting the flow of play or taking the lead from the child	Parent: You are arranging the furniture just how you want it.
	> Allows parent to emphasize and praise desired behaviors	
EMOTE by putting words to the feelings of the child and characters	> Parents increase a child's awareness of emotions and body sensations	Parent: You are angry; your fists are clenched tightly.
	> Parent increases child's emotional vocabulary	Parent: The dog is so scared to be lost and alone.
	> Parent helps child see/feel impact of emotions on others	Child: *Baby cries*
	> Parent helps organize child's internal world of feelings	Parent: The baby is crying. She is sad and needs holding and comfort.
	> Children gain practice in expression and impact of different emotions	
	> Children practice regulation, coping, and self-control	
	> Parents can co-regulate child through naming emotion and empathy/validation	