



# Special Parent-Child Play Times

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*This information is intended to accompany the video, [Special Play Time](#), a brief demonstration of Special Play Time between a mother and her 4-year old daughter. In the video, you will see the child begin with creative/mastery play and move to more personally meaningful play involving nurturing and giving medicine to the baby, which is reflective of the child's fear about having to take medicine when she is sick.*



**When children can play out their feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.**

(adapted from Mister Rogers)

## **Why Special Play Time and How Can It Help?**

The overall objective for Special Play Time is for parents to strengthen the parent-child relationship through a weekly 1-on-1 play time (typically 20-30 minutes) in which parents intentionally focus on simply “being-with” their child and enjoying their time together. In this special way of playing, the child leads the play and the parent follows the child’s lead without teaching or asking questions. Special Play Times are based on the fact that children communicate most easily through their play (not words). During these play times, children are provided the opportunity to make decisions about what and how to play, which provides them with a measure of control during times when their world may feel out of control. This special type of parent-child play allows children to feel more accepted and secure as they are provided the opportunity to express their inner thoughts and feelings including any worries or concerns over confusing or distressing events. Parents are then better able to understand their child and respond more accurately to their child’s emotional world and underlying needs. For example, acting out can be seen as an attempt to communicate a message. When a child feels understood, the need to act out that message is no longer necessary.

**Birds Fly, Fish Swim,  
Children Play!**

(Garry Landreth)

**Children communicate most easily through their play (not words). By accepting your child’s play and allowing her to lead, your child will show you her inner thoughts and feelings, including any worries and concerns over confusing or distressing events.**



## Guidelines for Special Play Time for Children 3-9

- Select a consistent time and place to have a once-per-week special playtime with your child, a time when you [parent] are feeling calm and can be emotionally available to your child and a time when your child is not tired or hungry. The place for your special play time should be away from others in the home, free of distractions, and a place where you don't need to worry about messiness or prized possessions. Playtimes should be 20-30 minutes in length. *Your child's therapist will help you select a time and place and discuss having individual playtimes with other children in your family.*
- Use simple, non-mechanical toys that facilitate expression, e.g. art materials, baby doll, animals, cars, blocks, play phone (a homemade doctor kit with bandages is a helpful addition). *Your child's play therapist can provide you examples of more toys to gather specific to the age(s) of your child/children.*
- Give your child your full attention. Face your whole body toward her and listen with your eyes and ears.  
*Try to see your child's play through her eyes.*
- Allow your child to lead the play. Join actively and playfully as a follower. This is not a time to teach or ask questions or provide your opinion. Teaching puts the parent in charge of the play time. This is a time when your child gets to decide what to do and, therefore, feels empowered.  
Sample responses: *"During our special play time, that is something you can decide." "Show me what you want me to do." "That's up to you." "That can be whatever you want it to be."*
- Verbally describe what you see to let the child know you are interested and involved in her play.  
Sample responses: *"You're giving the baby a bottle." "You're using lots of colors in your drawing." "You crashed that right into that" (if child is crashing a car into the stack of blocks).*
- Reflect your child's thoughts and feelings with words and actions. This shows you understand and that you delight in 'being-with' your child. You are creating an environment where your child feels accepted and valued.  
Sample responses: *"You think that is silly." "That surprised you." "You really like to draw." "You don't like how that turned out." "You wish there were different toys to play with."*
- Encourage your child's ability and effort (not based on whether your child did something correctly).  
Sample responses: *"You're working hard to put that together." "You have another idea about..." "You figured that out." "You kept trying until you got it."*
- Give your child a 5-minute and 1-minute notice that special play time will be over.  
Sample response: *"Ana, we have 5 minutes left to play together today and then it will be time to go have a snack."* (giving your child something to look forward to allows the child to more easily leave special play time).

## References



Landreth, G.L., & Bratton, S.C. (2020). Child-Parent Relationship Therapy (CPRT): An Evidence-Based 10-Session Filial Therapy Model, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

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