

# Thirty Minutes of Play

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**A** young child's emotional well-being is largely dependent on the quality of her interactions with her parents. In many homes, parents are stressed by work schedules, the demands of each day, their fast-paced schedules, keeping the house in order, worrying about paying the bills each month, and making sure their child is in social activities, sports activities, and learning activities. Parents are so stressed that they have forgotten to be intentional about meeting their child's emotional needs.

In many of these activities, parents and children occupy time and space together in the home, in the car on their way to activities, or on the sideline at the gym or the soccer field. However, there is little or no emotional sharing between the parent and child because the parent or child (or both) are focused on some activity other than being together. A child's emotional needs require focused attention and deliberate planned interventions.

A child needs time for emotional sharing with her parents, and parents need to focus on building an emotional bond with their child. A child often may act out behaviorally; become whiney, uncooperative, or fussy; complain; perform poorly in school; develop negative attitudes; become belligerent; withdraw; and become anxious, insecure, or aggressive when her emotional needs are not met. The antidote for these behaviors is a planned 30-minute playtime once a week in which parents intentionally provide the following play therapy relationship skills that meet a child's emotional needs.



Play provides a window into a child's emotional world.

## Focus on Your Child

For 30 minutes, be intentional about focusing on your child and work hard to understand her and what she is feeling. Nothing but the child exists in the world for 30 minutes. It is not necessary or realistic to expect parents to practice all of these skills (even most of the time) outside the special playtimes. But this dimension of intentional focusing can easily be used outside the playtimes to meet a child's emotional needs in a 30-second burst of attention.

Consider the following example of how a 30-second burst of attention may work. What do you do if you are on the phone and your child comes to you and

must show you her startling discovery right now? Do you put your child off? Instead, say to your friend on the phone, "Excuse me, I'll be back to you in 30 seconds." Put the phone down and give your child 30 seconds of undivided attention. Prize what your child is saying or showing you and then say: "Thank you so much for showing me that. Thank you for telling me that. I love you. Now I'm going to get back on the phone."

If you do not put the phone down and give your child a 30-second burst of attention, you will probably continue to talk on the phone while you try to push your child away for the next 10 minutes. In the



process, you are rejecting your child. A 30-second burst of attention will help your child feel important, cared for, and worthwhile.

### Look for Meaning in Play

In these special playtimes, be a keen observer of your child's play. Children use play to communicate their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and wishes. A child's play provides parents with a window to their child's inner emotional world.

For example, 8-year-old Jacob played out a scene involving a corral, horses, and barn. He pretended to put a bridle on the horse and commented, "It doesn't hurt his mouth." Then he took the horse to the barn and said: "When the horse kicks the stall, a light comes on in the house where the man stays who takes care of the horses. He will know the horse needs help."

The significance of this play is evident when it is revealed that Jacob receives electrical stimulation twice a week to strengthen the muscles in his jaws as a part of his speech therapy program. Small electrodes are placed inside his mouth and the procedure is generally painless. However, sometimes the muscles get tense from the stimulation, and Jacob can let the therapist know he is experiencing some discomfort by pressing a button to make a light come on.

### Return Responsibility

The need to be in charge and to make decisions is a basic emotional need for a child as well as a prerequisite for developing appropriate independence and responsibility. In the special 30-minute playtime, return responsibility for leadership and decision-making to your child.

Consider the following example:

**Child:** What do you want me to do?

**Parent:** In our special playtime, you can decide.

**Child:** Cool! I'm going to make a cat with the play dough.

Making decisions for a child fosters dependence. Allowing a child to make decisions during special playtime encourages independence and provides experiences for real-life situations. Responsibility cannot be taught; responsibility can only be learned through experience.

Consider the following example:

**Child:** (Picks up syringe from medical kit) What's this?

**Parent:** That can be whatever you want it to be.

**Child:** Oh, this is something I can feed the baby with.

Returning responsibility to your child allows her creativity to emerge and boosts her self-esteem. The essence of this approach is a deep and abiding belief in the child's ability to work things out. If a parent does not believe the child is capable, the child will not believe she is capable.

Short bursts of attention are better than lengthy rejections followed by lengthy play.

### Total Involvement

During playtime, your total involvement (your words, facial expressions, and movements) should communicate four messages to your child:

- **I am here.** For 30 minutes, nothing will distract me. I will be fully present physically, mentally, and emotionally. I will give all of myself to my child. I will be with my child.

- **I hear you.** I will listen fully with my ears and eyes to everything about my child, what is expressed and what is not expressed. I want to hear my child completely — everything he says, thinks, and feels.

- **I understand.** I want my child to know I understand what he is communicating, feeling, experiencing, and playing. Therefore, I will work hard to communicate my understanding and acceptance to my child. "You're frustrated because those pieces won't stay together." "You're proud of your picture." "You put lots of colors on your picture."

- **I care.** If the first three messages are communicated to my child, then he will know that I really care.



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