

## Come Play With Me!



Perhaps there is no greater honour than being invited by a child to “come and play”, or if a teen says, “you wanna hang out?” These invitations speak first and foremost to the relationship the young person has with the adult; there is an expectation of mutual enjoyment. These invitations come easily to children who trust their parent and have attachment security. For children who have experienced developmental trauma or who have multiple caregivers, that expectation of reciprocal engagement and fun is often diminished. The young person may have limited experiences of loving, close and joyful interactions with parents; in fact, close interactions with parents may have needed caution, or been frightening. So, although your invitation to a child or teen who has had a difficult start in life to “come and play” might get

rejected, there are many reasons to find ways to share joy and closeness with your adopted or fostered child.

1. *Enhancing attachment:* Attachment security develops in the first few years of life as a result of the parent consistently and accurately meeting the child's needs for nurture and socialization. Face-to-face play--- touching, talking, rocking, singing--- develops attachment and the ability to provide emotional and physiological regulation through touch and joy. Children will internalize their parent's expectations and values, through repeated joining and rupturing and rejoining in the play process. Eventually, this enhances communication and decreases ruptures in the relationship both of which will decrease the need for discipline. On the other hand, children who have been neglected and or frightened by their caregivers, are less able to play in an attuned way, less able seek and accept comfort, less able to offer and accept touch as an expression of love and affection. Spending time each day, in face-to-face engagement, experiencing shared positive emotions can help to grow attachment security in a very effective way. Because of attachment insecurity, the child may be resistant to intimacy, to physical and emotional closeness, and heart to heart, mind to mind interactions. Play is our covert tool to get around that resistance!
2. *Increasing positive emotion:* Chronic stress, trauma, abuse and neglect in the early years means that the child has had less experience of positive emotion (calm, happy, excited) and more experience of negative emotion (fearful, hurting, sad, shamed, distressed). The balance is way off and as a result, the developing brain has been shaped by these negative, painful experiences to be biased toward feeling and expressing negative emotions. Play is one of the most effective ways to begin to re-balance your child's brain. By engaging in face-to-face play, with shared attention and shared emotions, your child's brain will have these repeated experiences of shared joy. At first, these experiences may be too intense and cause dysregulation. It is important to pace your play in intensity and duration to match your child's ability to sustain the positive emotion. Shorter and more frequent in the beginning....



3. *Improving your child's ability to accept touch and comfort.* The most effective way to soothe a child who is securely attached is to scoop them up, give them hugs and loving words of comfort. The securely attached child is able to seek and accept this comfort and is soon off and running again. Many adoptive and foster parents struggle with being able to comfort and soothe the highly dysregulated, distressed and distraught child who is attachment-compromised and filled with negative emotions. The new play experiences of shared joy, fun touch and physical closeness will assist in developing trust and allowing comfort through touch.
4. *Supporting your child's sensory processing and integration:* Chronic stress and neglect can impair sensory processing and integration. Play involves all of the senses and when a sensitive and loving adult is the play partner, the senses can be engaged in ways that are not overwhelming or underwhelming to the child. Play begins where the child is at, where the child is able to enjoy the sensory input and not defend against it. Little by little, the child's tolerance for certain sensory experiences is increased or the child is helped to have sensations in a safe and controlled way. Sensory processing difficulties may dysregulate your child and when you cannot use touch and attachment to re-regulate, you and your child may have struggles to find ways to be calm and happy. A referral to an Occupational Therapist may be helpful.



5. *Developing curiosity, the basic ingredient of learning:* Solitary play is wonderful; it helps the child develop a sense of curiosity about the world and is the means by which children explore and learn about almost everything. Children who have been harmed within the caregiving environment are often fearful of the world and therefore not

curious, not willing to explore or learn. Playing with your child will, as attachment security increases, support your child's self-directed learning and curiosity. It is these skills that will, in part, enable your child to reach his or her potential as a student.

6. *Developing your child's pro-social skills:* In infancy, children learn, through thousands of face-to-face interactions with their loving parent, to read facial expressions, vocal nuances, and reciprocity (how what I do, affects you and how what you do, affects me). Sensitive parents know when to play with their baby and when to be calm and rest. This "feeling felt" deepens trust in the parent and in the relationship. Playing games, such as Patty-cake and This Little Piggy, helps children to integrate touch of others and awareness of their own body. Reciprocity, back and forth, give and take, become an integral part of the relationship. This reciprocity and give and take evolves into turn-taking and sharing. As the child grows, the ability to read social cues in the face, voice and body of others, allows the child to develop empathy for others and to act accordingly.



Examples of play:

- Singing songs that have actions and touch, face to face with eye contact and smiles!
- Baby bird feeding for preschoolers: pop blueberries / strawberries into your baby bird's mouth when the baby bird is looking into your smiling eyes.
- Physical play: piggy backs, rough and tumble wrestling, hide and seek (adult always seeks and big hugs when you find), swinging (push from the front), swimming with your child, anything that involves big movement, loving touch and smiles.

- Play in nature: walking, hiking, exploring flora and fauna, walk in streams and look for the small things together....

For sensory play:

- Playing with foods and materials of different textures.
- Climbing, crawling, turning and inverting such as at a playground climbing structure. Support the child to explore safely.
- Piggy back, shoulder rides, bouncing on knees, tickling (watch for the child's limit)
- Rocking in arms, chair, hammock or blanket for calming

Play that is less helpful:

- Avoid competitive games almost entirely until child is able to win or lose without getting big emotions.
- Avoid video games.
- Board games are of limited value until the child is old enough to enjoy the cognitive challenge. Play as teams. Play as one team. Play for 15 minutes and don't have winner or loser if you wish to teach the skill and practice turn-taking.
- Solitary screen use needs to be strictly limited. For young children, computers / screens should be used as a tool for learning, not play or entertainment.
- A good family movie, cuddled up together to watch, is lovely, once per week.

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For more information:

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Video series: When We Are Very Young: Trauma, Attachment and Parenting

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