Nature Play

Nature Play is Child Led Play
Children of all ages follow their genetically encoded 'play urges' naturally; what they need is adults who understand these patterns and who focus their support on being a Play Ally. The following Nature Play Guidelines will assist adults in becoming a Play Allies alongside their children.

What does child-led play look like?

Slow down and stand back
A huge part of supporting child-led play is about waiting, stepping back and observing, but in order to do this, we must first slow down ourselves.

Child-led play is about waiting to see what unfolds - we cannot be in a hurry.

Everyone is always learning
As a parent, one of the most important things to remember is that you don't have to understand it all, all of the time. Whether it's child development stages, botany or ornithology, we do not have to see every moment as a teaching moment, it is okay for us to step back and let the learning unfold rather than direct every 'learning moment'. In fact, we don't need to 'fix' situations for our children, but rather let them solve problems for themselves. We can gain a lot by waiting, observing and seeing what unfolds for the children, when it is cold or wet you may find that standing is preferred.

Movement and balance
Play begins with movement, and allowing our children the freedom to move and find their own balance is an important part of child-led play. When we support the natural unfolding of motor development, children lead at their own pace, taking steps and risks when only they are ready and feel capable. Because they are given enough time, they wait until they are ready before they move to try new things. As a consequence, these children have far fewer accidents than the children who are helped.

Child-led play is about waiting to see what unfolds - not putting your child into any position they can not get into (or out of) by themselves - you do not need to give your child a 'helping hand' especially if they can not do it themselves.

Crawling
Children who follow their genetic coding for physical development always crawl before they sit, stand or walk by themselves. Crawling is an important developmental stage for every child, it prepares their body and fine-tunes their balance so they can sit, stand and walk without falling over. Crawling is the time when peripheral vision is developed and where hand/eye co-ordination is mastered.

Child-led play is about waiting to see what unfolds - not standing, walking or lifting-to-climb a child who is perfecting their crawling.

Standing
After crawling comes standing while holding onto things - the best things to hold onto are ones that won't move. Eventually the child stands unaided on two feet - this huge milestone in balance will take months to perfect naturally. When the child is sure of her balance she risks balancing on one foot and moving off with the other, she takes her 'first step'.

Child-led play is about waiting to see what unfolds - not walking your child before they can walk unaided or lifting to climb.

You cannot learn balance for your child, and it is impossible for your child to master her own balance while you hold her hands to stand, to walk or climb.

Helping the 'helped'
Children learn what they are physically capable of by doing things unaided. When children are in the habit of being helped to achieve physical positions they are not ready for, they grow to expect help. Examples of unwarranted help include being lifted when climbing, steadied when balancing, rescued 'in case' they fall or get stuck - and all without waiting to see if they can manage for themselves. They also have no idea of risk. It may take your child a little time to adjust when you change your style of 'support'. At first they will look to you to help and take the lead; you won't. You will gently let them know that they can take the lead, and in doing so, they reset their assessment of risk. This can take some time, be prepared to slowly let go of their hand (physically and emotionally).

Here are three helpful ways to help the 'helped' learn to lead themselves -

1. Wait then ask, leaving time for a considered response before you pick up a child from a tumble.
2. Never put your child into a position they cannot get into or out of themselves.
3. Suggest another way of doing things within their capabilities. Without your help they will discover what they are capable of. Your gentle suggestions may guide them to work out what they can do for themselves.

Exploration

Objects of interest

What to expect - young babies will be exploring with their hands and mouths. Everything is new for them and the best way to get information is the mouth.

How to support exploration - observe, most items are tasted then released. If you want the item out of their mouth and in your hand, please do not snatch but ask for it with your open hand held out, palm up. Poisonous or dangerous items should be avoided all together.

Child-led play is about gathering information through touch, taste and smell - you do not need to snatch them from exploring.

Crawling and climbing

What to expect - older babies who are not yet walking by themselves need time on all fours to explore. On all fours means they will get dirty hands, knees, legs and bottoms so bring clothing that can get dirty.

How to support crawling and climbing - observe, find a place where you can see and observe. If you can make eye contact you are giving them all the support they need. If they look a bit stuck climbing (on a log or a slope) or loose their balance and tumble - wait and observe. Give them enough time to assess their body position. They might be okay to keep going or they might call for you.

Child-led play is letting your child crawl and climb so that they can find their own balance - you do not need to hold them or help them.

Off in the undergrowth

What to expect - toddlers and older children will head off when they are ready to explore on two legs. Your child needs to know you are there and most children will only go as far as their feelings of safety will stretch (the 'invisible safety line'). If you move with them, they will keep going, if you stay still they will find the edge of their safety line.

How to support children off in the undergrowth - Establish an anchor point, use eye contact, which can support both close and far, only follow closely if necessary.

If you have started the 'game of chase' with your toddler (what people refer to as 'he/she's a runner') then the same theory applies, your toddler will only go as far as they feel comfortable before looking back to check you are their anchor. Even the 'runners' will look back to make sure you are following. Stop the game of chase by teaming up with another parent. While you stay still, your teammate can keep an observational eye from a closer distance than you. It may take a few no chase games to get the stop the game habit.

Child-led play is observing sometimes close and sometimes from a distance - you do not need to follow your child closely everywhere they go.

Sharing

Sharing is an adult concept that children are not ready to understand until much later.

What to expect - some young babies can be very happy giving and taking with each other, at some point the item will become an extension of their self, and there will come a time when toddlers will be upset over that ONE thing while they learn to negotiate and handle their emotions around ownership. If left to it without adult interference, there is no problem - the problem usually arises in the adult who feels compelled to 'teach about sharing'. The child who is 'made to share' is not sharing, she is complying.

How to support children's interaction with objects - sit back and observe, if there does happen to be some negotiation wait to see if they can resolve it themselves. If not then the person holding the item is the owner, and when they have finished their turn they can offer it to the other child.

Child-led play is about waiting to see what unfolds - not about making your child share.

Conflict

Conflict is necessary for learning how to negotiate, to stand up for your rights, to learn to see things from other points of view, and much more. Conflict can also make us very uncomfortable. The way we facilitate conflict situations will determine whether the conflict is a child-led learning experience, or an adult-led teaching experience. How we deal with conflict between our children and ourselves can be authoritarian, "You do what I tell you to do", (I am so embarrassed); child-led and authoritative, "Lets come to an agreement"; or passive, "Anything to stop you screaming", (I am so embarrassed). No one is embarrassed when a situation of conflict is handled fairly.

Child-led play is about waiting to see what unfolds - we only step in when there is aggressive behaviour, violence, or the negotiation has reached a dead end.

Food

At Nature Play we share a healthy snack together at each session. We believe that food should always be a pleasure. For many children helping themselves to 'shared' food, and "exploring" new foods is also part of the experience. This is a time where adults can model how to share respectfully. When your child is making their own food choices, wait to see what unfolds - many parents find that when sharing food at Nature Play, their children enjoy a larger variety of different food than usual.

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