

Practical Guidelines for Supporting Children at Play

All children need the space, place, time and opportunity to follow their own play-urges

What kind of play? The word 'play' is used in many ways to mean different things. Here we talk about the play intelligence that is embedded into the very nature of the human being. And through play, intelligence unfolds.

Play Is In The Child

Children of all ages follow their genetically encoded play-urges naturally. We can see these Universal Play Patterns being played out today, just as they have throughout time, in every culture, on all continents. Play is the opportunity for children to become capable, do things themselves, grow their autonomy and learn how to learn.

Because play intelligence is 'built in', it means that the child can lead their own play – without being taught or having toys, activities or 'helping hands'. When play unfolds for the player they know exactly what to do, in the right sequence, and at the right pace. And they find around them all the objects they need for their play.

In play the child is capable

Benefits

Play intelligence grows skills that children take with them through life – benefits such as problem solving and lengthy attention spans, self-confidence and motivation, self-direction and creativity, social skills and imagination, physical agility and spatial awareness, risk management and working within one's own capabilities ... and so much more! Children who play in nature gain a valuable, sensory-rich relationship with nature.

To provide our children with the opportunity to play as nature intended - they need plenty of the space, time to play uninterrupted, in a play-rich environment from a secure base.

You Are The Secure Base

As the child's parent, caregiver, key-worker, play-ally, primary caregiver **your role is important. YOU are everything your child needs to feel safe, and when children feel safe they can play with their full attention.**

Because play is an 'inside job', our 'external care' takes on a different role when supporting our children at play. We don't just 'leave our children to play', far from it, we are present in a different way. We are the secure base for our children to move from and return to, the eyes of support, and there to step in only when necessary.

Step back and observe your children at play

When we step back we allow the child the freedom they need to unfold at their own pace.

When we observe we see our children grow capable and confident, while at the same time providing them with the security and freedom they need to thrive.

We Invite You To Observe

We have come up with a list of Top Tips to help 'play-allies' like you in your role:

Slow down. Wait. See what unfolds and start noticing what your children are capable of.

Eye contact. We can't stress enough the importance of eye contact – make your eyes available when near or far. All children need to 'check in' with their 'secure base' during play, particularly when they move further away – and you need to 'keep check' to ensure their world is safe. Eye contact doesn't interrupt play, so take a seat and observe.

The child moves from their secure base (you) when they are ready. Play is self-chosen so your child will choose when to get up and go – which means you stay in one place, or off to the side, where you are not encroaching on their space.

The youngest players (babies) always start on their back. Play begins with Movement. On their back babies can move limbs and look around and should always be able to see you, their

secure base. The move from your arms to your baby's own play needs your careful attention. When you tune into to your baby's cues and movements, you will feel/know when she is ready to move into her own play. Responding to her ready cues, by slowing down, holding eye contact and talking her through this move, you offer a secure transition. From lying on her back your baby is capable of playing her way to crawling, sitting and walking without your 'helping hands'.

Young explorers are all about Movement and Exploration work together. Moving towards new things to pick up and taste takes them on mini adventures. First getting to know the edge of the mat, then taking ever growing circles, exploring and returning back to your side. You may need to get a closer view of what is being explored, so consider looking from the side with enough room for 'the return'.

Children often want to explore further. Most children will only go as far as their feelings of safety will stretch from you, their secure base (the 'invisible safety line'). If you move with them, they will keep going, but if you stay still they will find the edge of their safety line. For the more experienced explorers, let them know one of the oldest rules of the forest – always stay where they can see you.

When we see risk, conflict, struggle or falls in play, these are not cues to offer help. It can feel uncomfortable watching someone struggle when we are used to helping. We invite you to notice the difference between risks and hazards,

conflict and aggressive behavior, struggle and suffering. Children are capable of picking themselves up – but only if we give them the space to be capable.

Players used to being helped and entertained may take a while to grow into their capabilities.

Nature Play offers this safe and secure space, place and time to adjust and grow at the pace right for the person.

Children who are capable are safe

Unnecessary Play Interruptions

Traditionally a lot of play is interrupted in the name of 'safety' and 'helping' the child to become capable. These well-intentioned interruptions are counterproductive to both play and safety. Referring back to the list of benefits: **Problem solving** cannot develop when we step in to fix problems for them. **Lengthy attention spans** cannot develop when we interrupt with our questions, praise, frequent warnings and entertainment. **Self-confidence and self-motivation** cannot develop when we prompt them into being ready. **Self-direction and creativity** develop when we stop having ideas for them, such as setting up activities and directing them. **Social skills** cannot develop when we are hovering and looking for 'teaching moments'. **Physical agility and spatial awareness** cannot develop when we help them to balance or climb, or put them into positions that are way beyond their own capabilities. **Imagination** cannot develop when we remove their found treasures and give them image-ready toys.

Risk management and working within one's own capabilities are impossible when there are 'helping hands' managing them beyond their own capabilities.

When we support play we refrain from imposing our external influences on our children's play.

We only interrupt when absolutely necessary.

Interrupting Play When Necessary

A safe and secure environment is integral for play to thrive. Physical safety and emotional security together provide the right conditions for optimal learning. The brain's learning activity shuts down when we **don't feel safe**. Play is by nature a peaceful experience where the player manages their excitement and risk.

Occasionally we need to step in and restore the safe and secure environment. We step in to stop aggressive-violent behavior (such as harming others or oneself, or destroying property), where there is a hazard (rotten wood or poisonous plants), or when a child is out of their depth and unable to manage physically or emotionally.

If you spot a potentially unsafe situation developing, move in **calmly and quietly**. **We move in quickly to block any unwanted physical contact or falls. When a child is 'out of control' we return them to the secure base to reconnect and calmly restore their self-control.**

For more information on play and supporting play please visit www.nature-play.co.uk