Solihull Approach

Let's Play

This leaflet is designed to help parents understand why play is so important for children and includes suggestions for fun activities, which we hope parents and children will enjoy doing together.

All children need to play

All children are different, but every child is born with a natural desire to play and explore. Play is like a child's job – it is how they learn about and understand the world around them.

What is play?

Babies start playing and communicating from the minute they are born. When a baby watches an adult's face or listens to an adult's voice, he is starting to learn about taking turns, having fun and being playful with another person. This develops into exchanging smiles and giggles, looking at things together and exploring toys and objects.

Young children don't need lots of expensive toys – the packaging of the toys often make the most interesting playthings: a cardboard box can become a car, a spaceship and all kinds of interesting things. The most important factors in play are your time and your joint imaginations. As a parent, you can help by watching your child play, waiting to see what catches his attention, and helping him to explore those things in his own unique way.

© Solihull Approach 2012

Children can lead the way!

When children play, they like to lead the way

The first step for you is to recognise what your child is interested in and to follow her lead. Following your child's lead is not a passive process of just watching, but depends on your ability to follow and encourage your child's way of expressing herself. It is important to try and pick up on your child's cues of wanting you to join in, wanting to change their focus of attention or wanting to stop playing a particular game. This isn't always easy and can be a case of trial and error – your child will soon let you know whether you are wanted as an active play partner, or watcher, at any particular time.

Children's play can tell us a lot about how they are thinking and feeling. For children who are too young to 'talk' in words, their play will be like their part of a conversation. Early on in your relationship with your baby, your attention and sensitivity to what she is trying to communicate is very important. Even if you are not sure what she is trying to say, trying to understand will show your baby that you are interested in her and trying to make a connection. Children tend to be very generous in their efforts to help us to understand them and so don't worry if you feel confused at first, you will get lots more chances!



Mirroring your baby's facial expressions, and imitation, can seem like just a bit of fun but at the same time this is helping your baby to learn about herself and her feelings. The more secure your child feels, the more she'll be able to explore and experiment with new things in a creative way.

Stimulation is important for your child and there are so many fascinating toys around for children to play with. Even though your child will be able to learn certain things from playing with his toys, if you join in too that will make playtime a much more meaningful experience and will also encourage much needed social skills for when he joins nursery or a playgroup.

Play is an ideal opportunity for your child to learn to focus his attention, imitate actions and sounds, take turns, anticipate what comes next, recognise when something is hidden that it still exists, understand new words, say new words and pretend.

It is well known that the skills used in play are the basics for a child learning to communicate through language, so playing with your child is also teaching him language skills.

Children need to believe that their efforts are worthwhile and considered important enough to be taken seriously and to be given the time to be understood and listened to. Play really is serious business.

Children learn best when they lead the way

All parents want to teach their children new skills like counting, learning shapes, colours and words. The best way to do this is to for you to point out the things your child is already interested in and playing with, and then say the words for them. For example 'that's the blue square you've put in' or, 'you've got 1, 2, 3 little ducks'. Research shows that this way of playing really helps your child learn. It is like building a ladder together, where your child builds a step, you add a step, your child adds a step and so on.

It can be surprisingly difficult to let your child take the lead in play. You might want to play too, or make suggestions, or ask questions so that your child learns things. Actually, your child enjoys play best when you describe what they are already doing, rather than asking too many questions or making too many suggestions.



Sometimes your child will do things that aren't quite 'correct', like putting a water cup on their head, painting a face in green, or playing a board game upside down. You might be concerned that this could lead them into bad habits or stop them from learning about how to do things right. But don't

worry, what might seem to you to be an 'incorrect' use of a particular toy might actually be a clever and creative idea from your child exploring his imagination. Even better, your child will have great fun if you join in being silly.

The best kinds of play are sometimes the messiest!

It can be really hard to let children make a big mess, but what might look to you like a huge mess may actually be a child's most creative moment! There are a number of reasons why messy play is so helpful for children's development. They get to experiment and explore in exciting ways, helping them to learn lots of new things about the world. Messy play also helps children to understand that sometimes things do get to be a real mess, but it can be sorted out and made 'OK' again with a little bit of help from other people. This is the start of your child learning about coping skills. Children who have been allowed to explore messy play and have been helped to learn how to tidy up start to understand that they are able to cope with messy feelings too. As they get older, when they come across difficult situations, they are able to tolerate these difficulties and think about ways to sort it out. So try not to get cross if your child makes a mess, and try to have fun with them helping you clear up afterwards.



Young children explore objects by putting them in their mouths and this is an important part of their learning. Young children see food as a great play opportunity because squishing, mushing and mixing their food is such a great way to learn about textures, colours and touch. If you are worried about the mess, get a plastic sheet or mat to put underneath their chair during mealtimes. They will grow out of it eventually!

Play helps children learn about emotions

Children who have experienced positive play experiences with their carers, in which they have been able to take the lead, tend to develop better self-confidence and are better able to trust other people. This is because play helps children learn that they can have a positive impact on their surroundings and that adults will support them to use their imagination.

Parents are important partners in a child's world of play

Sometimes children don't want to play with their parents, and this can make the parent feel hurt or rejected. If this happens, it can be tempting to start avoiding play times with your child, but this will often just make matters worse. You might try just sitting near your child watching him play, without making too many comments at first. Remember, your child values your positive attention and words more than your suggestions or directions at this stage. If your child asks you to join in, try to follow their instructions about what to do – your child will love this sense of being in charge for once!

Some parents find it hard to play

It is not unusual for parents to find playing with their children a bit hard at times. This might be because they get bored at their child's need for constant repetition, or might feel it is their responsibility to come up with all the ideas during play. Sometimes parents feel silly, or don't know what to do. There are times when parents might worry about allowing their child to play 'incorrectly' with things or be a bit silly. We hope that this leaflet will help to emphasise the importance of letting your child take the lead in their play. Given a few simple



toys or objects and a bit of attention from you, most children will get to work imagining and pretending and having fun.

Sometimes playing with your child may bring back memories from your own childhood which may be both positive and negative. Occasionally these memories can get in the way of you and your child enjoying your play together. If this happens, you might find it helpful to talk it over with someone you feel comfortable with, for example your health visitor, a friend or family member.