

Child-Directed Play

Child-Directed Play provides children with a brief dose of intense, joyful, one-on-one attention. There are key features of this style of play that distinguish it from a typical parent-child interaction.

Setup

Child-Directed Play works best with open-ended, creative activities such as coloring, blocks, or pretend play. Board games or games with rules should be avoided during this time. Whenever possible, items that the child should not touch should be removed from the play space to reduce the chance of needing to give instructions during play.

Playtime

Choose a 5-10 minute period of time when you can be alone with your child (or have their sibling engaged in a separate activity). Announce that you and your child can have special one-on-one time, and they can choose the activity. During play, imagine that you are narrating an event such as a sports game or concert. Show lots of enthusiasm through praise ("thank you for handing me the doll!"), description ("you're building a very tall building!"), and imitation ("I love how you used blue for your painting, I'm going to use blue for mine too!"). Additionally, repeat or restate the things your child says with enthusiasm to boost the level of attention in this activity.

Special Rules

During Child-Directed Play, it is critical to avoid giving instructions or commands. This is a time when the child can be 100% in control. It is also important to avoid asking questions. When children are asked questions, there is an expectation for them to answer. This can pull them away from what they are doing, turning the interaction into "adult-led" play rather than Child-Directed Play. The goal is to give invitations for children to talk rather than requiring them to talk.

FAQs

Why only 5-10 minutes?

Child-Directed Play takes a lot of energy, and it is very hard to maintain the appropriate level of enthusiasm for more than 10 minutes. Additionally, during this playtime, commands or corrections of any kind are avoided, which is typically not sustainable for long periods.

What if my child does something inappropriate?

During this time, it is important to ignore all non-dangerous behavior. When your child says or does something that is disruptive, but safe, briefly pause the conversation or turn away. Begin praising again once you see your child make a more appropriate choice ("thank you for putting the toys down!"). If your child does something unsafe, calmly state that playtime is over and block any further dangerous behavior.

How do I avoid asking questions?

Questions are often used when information is not known ("what are you building?"). Commenting on visible details ("you're putting the green block on top of the orange block!") provides the child an opportunity to tell you more about their play without placing a demand on them to answer.

