

# WellNest Counseling

*Bringing wellness to your nest*



## Week 11: The Power of Play

**Rule of Thumb: Give in fantasy what you can't in reality.**

**Rule of Thumb: Foster a positive relationship using your child's language: play to connect.**

Please complete this workbook before your live meeting

It is true what they say, “There is no manual for parenting,” which is kind of comical at this point because I am sure my “manual” is not the first “manual” you have bought on the topic of parenting. Hopefully, these last 10 weeks have been helpful for you in the sense that I have offered guides on how to handle different situations. Things you can use to help mold your own styles and authenticity so parenting feels genuine for you. And for you to feel confident in your choices in your parenting. So, for today’s topic, I am going to offer you one last guide to close on. And this topic feels appropriate since we have spent so much of the last 11 weeks on attachment and rereationships So today we are going to talk about play.

As adults, we lose touch with play. We forget how to play. We forget to be silly and to laugh and not take ourselves so seriously. There is so much science to back up why playing is so very important for everyone’s well-being. In children, play is an essential part of their development. 3- and 4-year old’s play to learn. As adults, we are told we need play to balance our lives. It’s often called “self-care” but it is still a form of play. As an adult, you might go to the spa or on a trip rather than play with dolls or trucks. But it is still play. So, this is what I want to offer you today. I want to help you get back in touch with how to play. Today, you might feel silly or ridiculous or even dumb, but, playing with your child is the number one way to reduce unwanted behaviors, anxiety, depression, and many other concerns parents have. When parents play with their children they increase positive relationships, self-esteem, and confidence. We are going to look at why. But first, as always, a little reflection:

1. When is the last time you played? Or if you can’t think of a time, redefine play by thinking of the last time you felt joy and were more carefree.
2. What brings you joy?
3. Is there something you could do for hours and lose track of time as an adult? (Not watching TV or scrolling)
4. As a child what were your favorite games to play?



5. Did your parents ever play with you?
  
6. Do you play with your kids?
  
7. Does playing with your kids at their level come easy or hard to you?
  
8. What part of play feels like a burden to you?

### **The Science Behind Play:**

Over and over again, play has been proven to be an essential part of a child's development. In 1964, scientists conducted studies on rats that proved how necessary play was for the brain. They put one set of rats in a "boring" environment and another in an environment filled with toys and objects to explore. They found that the rats that lived in the exciting environment had thicker brain cortices. Essentially, they found that social play and exploration literally create new brain cells! When animals don't play, there are worse outcomes. For example, it was found that when rats were deprived of play, their prefrontal cortex was underdeveloped. This is the part of the brain responsible for self-control, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition of impulses (all reasons for which parents bring their kids to me. Also this is a reason PLAY therapy works so well with kids.) So, we can see why play is so important and different types of play are important as well.

### *Rough-and-Tumble:*

Many parents (and even schools) will argue against rough-and-tumble play like wrestling. But research shows that when done at a high quality, kids that engage in this type of play are more socially competent. Why? One reason is when a child is engaging in rough and tumble play, they must learn to self-inhibit. If they are stronger than their friend, they must play less rough. Children also need to learn to send the appropriate social cues during this activity. Their body



language needs to send the message that they are being playful and not angry. When parents engage in high-quality rough-and-tumble play, kids are learning a great deal about interacting. By high quality, I mean that the parents offer a safe way to play while switching from winning and losing, all while the parent is being affectionate.

### *Outside Play*

It's no secret that being outdoors can boost your mood. When kids get unstructured time outside to play, their ability to focus in other areas, such as academics, increases. Being in the sun has been known to boost mood as well (wear sunscreen, of course).

### *Pretend Play*

Pretend play has been researched for decades. The benefits include: learning social-emotional skills like cooperative play, emotional regulation, and practicing motor skills and sequences that they will use later in life. Universally, when engaged in pretend play, kids are practicing skills that they see the adults doing. They are literally practicing for life. During pretend play, kids practice self-control, increase language ability, increase creativity, and increase problem-solving.

#### Physical benefits:

- Stimulates connection between the left and right hemispheres of the brain.
- Increases coordination
- Increases balance
- Increases gross and fine motor skills

#### Emotional benefits:

- Experience an array of emotions that are manageable
- Increases emotional regulation through role play

#### Social benefits:

- Develop awareness of social cues
- Increases empathy
- Practices collaboration
- Practices negotiation

#### Cognitive benefits:

- Increases language skills
- Puts the child in a state of calm, making the brain primed for learning
- Increases executive functioning skills like planning, prioritizing, and organization

#### Communication:

- Allows a safe way to practice communication



- Allows for practice in resolving conflict

### **Why don't we play:**

We know play is good for us. Even before this week, it is likely something you heard time and time again. So why don't we play more even though we know this?

*Lack of safety in childhood:* Kids who don't feel safe, don't play. If you don't have many memories of playing it could be because play wasn't prioritized in your home.

*We are too busy:* Like many other things that are good for us, we are just too busy to do them. We are too busy to eat right, too busy to take breaks, too busy to sleep, and too busy to play.

### **When shouldn't we play?**

Play works best when everyone is attuned to each other and emotionally grounded. Sometimes we aren't in the mood to play and other times we have to work to get there. Children are the same way. Sometimes they are serious. So being attuned to your child and making sure you aren't accidentally undermining their boundaries is important, even in play.

### **Setting up intentional play time with kids 7 and under (ish):**

It just takes 30 minutes a week of uninterrupted special playtime for you and your family to start seeing the benefits of play. This special play time is different from other play times. You are to be keenly focused and interested in what your child is playing. There are to be no interruptions during this time. You are sending the message through your actions that *nothing* is more important than your child during this time. What a powerful message! No phone call, no interrupting siblings, nothing your spouse needs to talk about, nothing.

#### *When and how long:*

- Just 30 minutes a week is all it takes to see the benefits of play.
- Pick a time that you can put down your phone and be uninterrupted
- This time is just for you and your child (no siblings, dogs, work, spouses, aunts, or uncles...)
- You don't need any special toys. Wherever your child already has, all his or her toys are fine.

#### *Do's and Don'ts of Special Play time:*

#### **DO:**

##### **1. Set the stage:**

- Make sure you have set up childcare for other siblings.



- Make sure your social medias and devices are turned off and not in the room
  - Keep all screens out of special playtime.
  - Set the tone before special playtime. Say “Can I play with you? I want to know what you’re doing.”
- 2. Let the child lead:**
- When you allow your child to lead, you get a glimpse into your child’s inner world. You will be able to pick up on what your child needs from you through their play.
  - Say things like, “Show me what you want me to do.” Or “You want me to put that on that.”
  - Use the whisper technique if you aren’t sure what your child wants you to do or if your child wants you to play a role. Say “What should I do now?” or “What type of teacher am I?” in a whisper
  - Allow the child to name objects. Use pronouns until you know what your child calls it a name or a label. For example, the popsicle stick might be a key. Say “Oh looks like you picked that up.” Once your child calls it a key you can say, “Oh looks like you picked up the keys.”
- 3. Join in the child’s play as a follower**
- Your child gets to be the leader and you the follower.
  - So long as nothing or no one is getting hurt or damaged, your child gets to pick the game and activity.
  - If your child doesn’t know what to do or asks for your guidance you can say, “Right now, you get to decide.” Or “You get to tell me what that is.”
- 4. Verbally track the child’s play**
- Let your child know you are participating and paying attention even when you aren’t invited to play
  - Track what you see, like a sports announcer over the radio. You might say, “You picked that up and put it there.” Or “Now the baby is hungry and you are feeding it.”
- 5. Reflect feelings during play**
- Reflect feelings as you see them. Any facial expression, name the feeling. You might say, “You were surprised when that fell” or “You feel love for the baby” or “You seem happy.”
- 6. Set firm and consistent limits.**
- Even as the child gets to be the leader, you are still in ultimate control. Do set limits around what is okay and not okay when needed and as they arise. Use FLO or choice-giving when needed. The goal is to create a fun experience for the both of you, but that does not mean that your child gets to break or hurt things or people.



## 7. Salute the child's power and encourage effort

- Acknowledge and recognize any effort put forth by your child during your special playtime.
- Allow your child the chance to struggle and try before you step in to help
- Verbally acknowledge their attempt by saying "You didn't give up" or "you've got a plan for that" or "You did it!" or "You figured it out!" or "We did that together" or "Sounds like you know a lot about \_\_\_\_\_"

## 8. Be verbally active

- Even if your child is not playing with you or inviting you to play continue to verbally show your interest by tracking and narrating what you see. Say, "You moved that there." Or "You are rocking the baby."
- If you don't know what to say use an empathetic grunt. "hmmm" or "oh!"

## DON'T

1. Don't criticize any behavior
2. Don't praise the child
3. Don't ask leading questions
4. Don't allow interruptions of the special playtime
5. Don't give information or teach
6. Don't preach
7. Don't initiate new activities
8. Don't be passive or quiet.

## Setting up intention Play time for kids ages 7-12 (ish):

This is really similar to the above. Your goal is to spend time doing something your child loves, regardless of how silly or boring you think it is. You are sending the message that your child is so important to you that you are taking time out of your day to do something that is important to them. With 7 to 12-year-olds, they don't necessarily play like little kids do. Most nearly-8-year-olds start to become far more interested in games with rules. So, your play starts to shift from pretend play to soccer, swimming, Guess Who, Monopoly (I know, don't come at me, this game is banned from most family game nights), or even cooking. The point is to find an activity that your child loves and let them be the leader and teacher. So, if you are cooking, let them make up the recipe and you guys can laugh at how terrible the cookies came out!

## DO:

### 1. Set the stage:

- Make sure you have set up childcare for other siblings.
- Make sure your social media and devices are turned off and not in the room
- Keep all screens out of special playtime.



- Set the tone before special playtime. Say “I want to know what you’re doing” or “Would you like to do something together?”
- 2. Let the child lead:**
    - When you allow your child to lead you get a glimpse into your child’s inner world. You will be able to pick up on what your child needs from you through their play.
    - Say things like, “Show me what you want me to do.” Or “You want me to put that on that.”
    - Let them pick the activity or game. Refrain from trying to make the game go the way you think it “should” go.
  - 3. Join in the child’s play as a follower**
    - Your child gets to be the leader and you the follower.
    - So long as nothing or no one is getting hurt or damaged, your child gets to pick the game and activity.
    - If your child doesn’t know what to do or asks for your guidance you can say, “Right now, you get to decide.” Or “You get to tell me what that is.”
  - 4. Verbally track the child’s play**
    - Let your kiddo know you are paying attention. Kids at this age are more sensitive and self-conscious. Saying things like, “You put that there” will likely get you a response like, “Why are you talking like that?” Instead, use phrases of encouragement and esteem-building.
  - 5. Reflect feelings during play**
    - Reflect feelings as you see them. Any facial expression, name the feeling. You might say, “That isn’t working the way you want. You seem frustrated.”
  - 6. Set firm and consistent limits.**
    - Even as the child gets to be the leader, you are still in ultimate control. Do set limits around what is okay and not okay when needed and as they arise. Use FLO or choice giving when needed. The goal is to create a fun experience for both of you, but that does not mean that your child gets to break or hurt things or people.
  - 7. Salute the child’s power and encourage effort**
    - Acknowledge and recognize the effort put forth by your child during your special playtime.
    - Allow your child the chance to struggle and try before helping
    - Verbally acknowledge their attempt by saying “You didn’t give up” or “You’ve got a plan for that” or “You did it!” or “You figured it out!” or “We did that together” or “Sounds like you know a lot about \_\_\_\_\_”
  - 8. Be verbally active**
    - Even if your child is not playing with you or inviting you to play continue to verbally show your interest by tracking and narrating what you see. Be careful not to sound condescending.





**DON'T**

1. Don't criticize any behavior
2. Don't praise the child
3. Don't ask leading questions
4. Don't allow interruptions of the special playtime
5. Don't give information or teach
6. Don't preach
7. Don't initiate new activities
8. Don't be passive or quiet.

**Setting up intentional Play time for kids age 13 and up:**

Your teenager is not going to want to play with you, I'm just going to be honest with you. Don't even use the word play. We, as adults, will quietly understand that we are still playing, the definition has just broadened. Instead, get interested in the things your child is interested in. This might look like playing a video game (and losing horribly at it), scrolling through TikTok, making a TikTok, listening to their teen drama, or anything else that they are into. Our do's and don'ts change slightly but are mostly the same.

1. **Set the stage:**
  - Make sure you have set up childcare for other siblings.
  - Make sure your social media and devices are turned off and not in the room
  - Set the tone before special playtime. Say "I want to know what you're doing" or "Would you like to do something together?"
2. **Let the child lead:**
  - When you allow your child to lead you get a glimpse into your child's inner world. You will be able to pick up on what your child needs from you through their activity and verbal expression.
  - Say things like, "Show me what you want me to do." Or "How do you work this?"
  - Let them pick the activity or game. Refrain from trying to make the game go the way you think it "should" go.
3. **Join in the child's play as a follower**
  - Your child gets to be the leader and you the follower.
  - So long as nothing or no one is getting hurt or damaged, your child gets to pick the game and activity.
  - If your child doesn't know what to do or asks for your guidance you can say, "Right now, you get to decide." Or "I really want to know what you like to do."
4. **Verbally track the child's play**
  - Let your kiddo know you are paying attention simply by having a conversation with them. Be engaged and interested (even if you have to feign interest).
  - Ask open ended but specific questions to get them talking.
5. **Reflect feelings during play**





### Using Play to Empower Discipline:

Keep in mind that getting playful with your kids can turn around an attitude quickly. Sometimes we don't need to use consequences to encourage positive behaviors. Sometimes we can play our way there. Play can be used to co-regulate with your child. Remember, little kids need co-regulation around 90% of the time. Instead of threatening or even using choice-giving as a consequence, try being playful. Try these ideas:

- Set a timer to get dressed in the morning
- Play the floor is lava on the way to the car (which is a boat that travels through lava now)
- Use the whisper technique – instead of raising your voice to be heard, saying, “Come here! I have something to tell you!” in a playful whisper like you are co-conspiring!
- Have a dance party
- Sing the tasks that need to be done
- Be overly dramatic in a playful way – when your 6-year-old won't walk, you fall down and feign your hatred for walking and how your feet don't work. Try to get the giggles going. If your child doesn't think it's funny, then apologize and say you were just trying to make them laugh but you won't do it again.
- Role reversals – pretend you are scared of going to school and let your child soothe you

Can you think of any games and play that work for your child?

Reflect:

1. Pick one playful activity you can use to empower your discipline. Which one will you try this week?
  
2. What thoughts or questions do you have from this week's material?



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