

# 'Mom, can you play with me?' It's important to play with your kids but let them make the rules

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Credit: Ron Lach/Pexels

Young children love to play with their parents. But for busy parents, it's often the last thing they feel like doing.

Running a home and family, doing paid work and trying to squeeze in some [personal time](#) mean [parents](#) don't have a lot of time or energy to play magical princess dragons or soccer ninjas.

But playing with your kids and letting them lead the play is really important. Here's why and how you can approach it.

## **Why is play so important?**

Children love to play. But it is more than a way for them to enjoy themselves. It is also the [principal way they learn](#) about their world.

There are many types of play. For example, it can be manipulating objects, such as play dough. Or it can be imaginary, where [children](#) pretend they are mums, dads or babies.

In play, children have ideas and then follow those ideas in a way that is not simply a response to what surrounds them. Instead, they use that environment to imagine and create another world. A block becomes a phone, a table a house and a garden the home of a dragon.

Holding an imaginary theme in mind and creating a sequence of actions and appropriate language to enact it requires considerable intellectual effort. This sees children perform at a higher level than when engaged in other activities [they are not leading](#).

Play teaches children to test their hypotheses and solve problems they encounter. Parents will notice children usually play about the world in which they are living. This is why they play families, pets and other familiar roles such as shopkeepers, doctors or nurses.

These themes may look mundane to parents (even boring). Yet for children they are exciting opportunities to explore their world, find out about the various roles they see around them and to bring ideas learned in a variety of contexts together in play.

## Play develops concentration and emotional skills

Often children are seen as having short attention spans. Yet in play [they can follow a theme](#) or idea they have chosen for a longer time than when engaged in adult-led activities.

Developing the capacity to sustain attention to that idea in play and ignore other stimuli builds children's [capacity to self-regulate](#).

Self-regulation—the ability to control emotions and actions—is important in learning, at school and socially and emotionally.

Play is also [central to language development](#). Play enables children to use the words and ideas they hear in their [everyday lives](#) and experiment with them in imaginary environments. In play they may talk to themselves to guide their thinking.

## Why do my kids want to play with me?

Children from approximately 18 months to eight years old want to play with their parents. Their parents are the center of their worlds, until their attention shifts increasingly to their peers.

They want to do so because it helps their learning and development. Parents [can anticipate](#) their child's thinking and create shared meaning in a way other children of the same age are not able to do.

Shared meaning enables to play to continue and makes it more interesting.

## The role of adults in play

A parent's role is to assist their child in play. This means it is important for adults to let children be the [decision makers](#). Parents can initiate the play, make suggestions or provide props. But for the activity to be regarded as "play," children must be those who make the decisions and guide its direction.

[Research shows](#) when an adult attempts to control the play children become distracted and quickly lose interest.

Play is not instructional (this is not about teaching your child how to do something). We have all experienced situations where we have been talked at, not discussed with, and likely we found it much harder to focus.

Children [need to have this control](#) because in play they are operating exactly at the level at which they are best able to learn. Suggestions from an adult or older child, however, can take the child's play to a higher level. This makes it more challenging intellectually than if children were playing alone or with peers.

## **How much play and how often?**

Children are instructed in almost every aspect of their day—when to get up, when to go to sleep, what to eat. Having a regular play time in which they lead, make decisions about an activity and how it progresses, gives them power and a sense of control in their lives.

My work as a professional teacher and early childhood academic has shown me that when parents—particularly those concerned about their child's behavior—dedicate 30-plus minutes each day (or every other day) to parent-child play, they find their child is happier and more easily guided in other aspects of their lives. This also strengthens their relationship.

Not all parents can manage this. But finding regular play time when you can is likely to be [well worth it](#).

## A valuable window

Parents who play with their children can find it is a valuable window into their children's thinking, interests and world.

If you are going to join in the [play](#), do so fully. Put away your phone—and sit on the floor or follow your child to where they are playing. This shows your child you are genuinely joining in.

Hopefully, by dedicating this time and prioritizing it, parents may also find their child becomes more amenable to parents also allocating time for themselves.

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