

# Building relationships: play, music and story

A guide for Parents, Educators and Teachers



Strengthening  
relationships,  
learning  
and building  
communication.

Building relationships: play, music and story – A guide for Parents, Educators and Teachers

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Proudly funded by the Australian Government

Project Coordinator: Alison Stone

ISBN: 978-0-9924923-5-9

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Printed in Australia.



**Australian Government**  
**Department of the  
Prime Minister and Cabinet**

# Playfulness



Enjoying constructive play together.



Joining in the fun of singing together.



Supporting reflection and wonder.

Being playful helps strengthen relationships and learning, and it builds communication.

Playfulness is especially important with children, because safe play – play that is kind – is the basis of early learning.

## What is meant by kind, safe play?

Kind play means tuning-in to what is positive for children and doing and saying those positive things.

Safe play means that children are physically safe and not in danger of hurting themselves. But it also means that they are emotionally safe. This means that they are encouraged and supported emotionally by adults.

## Why is kind, safe play powerful for learning?

It is because it is enjoyable. And this enjoyment and pleasure in play create the brain-based conditions for learning.

In play, children learn social skills, language and creativity. Opportunities to learn these skills are all woven together during play – all three sets of skills are supported at once.

To help understand how powerful play is, let's have a look at each of these skills in turn.

## How play builds social skills

During play, there is a flow of turns back-and-forth between the players. These turns flow adult to child, child to adult, and also child to child.

Sometimes this turn-taking might be rolling the dice in a board game or running off to hide in hide 'n seek; but turn-taking is mostly about the small moments of eye contact and smiles and nods and words. I look at you, you look at me, I smile at you, you smile too, we both laugh – and we feel connection. All these things form the



reciprocal turn-taking that connects us and strengthens our relationships.

Play is the best way for children to experience this reciprocal connection; and it is the best teacher of reciprocal connection.

When we play with children, they learn how to be leaders. For example, when they say, “I’ve got an idea, let’s make a mountain”, they are leading the play.

Play also teaches them how to cooperate and be part of a team. For example, when their playmate says, “I’ve got an idea, let’s make a mountain”, and they say “Yeah, good idea” and start pulling the cushions off the couch to use in their mountain,

**Reciprocal means ‘to return something’. So reciprocal connection is connection that is returned. You feel connection with someone, and that person also feels it and returns it to you.**

then they are joining in the play in cooperation with each other.

Real life for all of us is made up of moments in which we are a leader and moments in which we are part of a team. We learn to weave our way through life sometimes leading, sometimes cooperating, sometimes negotiating. We must figure out which one is the right response for the social situation we are in.

In play, children learn how to flow back-and-forth between leading and following so that they keep connected with their playmates. Play gives them opportunities to experience and practise these skills. Skills which they

will need all through their lives.

Children naturally display leadership; and adults can set up play experiences to support this. An example of how to do this is to say, during the play, “Oh, no! What will we do now?” or “I don’t know what to do” or “I wonder what will happen?” – then wait for the child to come up with the idea. This sets the child up to lead the ‘solution’ in the play. By doing this, you help children experience themselves in the role of a leader. Setting-up play like this is so good for children – they learn how to show their knowledge and ideas, and at the same time, how to care about the needs of others.





“Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.”

Bruce Perry

To keep connected with their playmates, children (and adults) must care about the needs of others. Part of caring about the needs of others is to give those others the opportunity to be the leaders. Then children can experience that it is also enjoyable to cooperate with someone else's ideas. By learning to do this, each child and adult in the play can continue to enjoy being connected, because they are each giving and sharing in the roles of play. Adults can be such fabulous special helpers in play because they can set up for each child to experience the role of leader and the role of cooperating in the team.

Being connected with others supports our wellbeing throughout our lives. So helping children to learn this skill of flowing back-and-forth between leading the team and being in the team is powerful. It helps set them up to gain satisfaction and enjoyment from their lives.

So we see that play helps social learning: children learn to be mindful of others; they learn how to help others, how to challenge them and how to enjoy them.

Playfulness builds children's sense of self. It builds their confidence in relationships with others and their knowledge of the world.



## How play builds language

Enjoyable play has usually got some enjoyable talk going along with it too – so it creates opportunity to learn that talk. The talk might be on the theme of the play – for example, the theme might be about 'monsters' in the 'mountains', and so children can learn new words like 'cave' and 'escape' and 'camouflage'! Play builds the language that goes along with the theme of the play.



Play also builds the language of sharing, caring and negotiating. To be the leader and follower and weave between these two, children need to learn words and sentences like ‘what do you think’, ‘let’s share’, ‘after your turn, it’s my turn’.

Growth of children’s language really matters. Language is one of the foundations of our knowledge. It is also the foundation of literacy. Children need good language to become good readers and writers. And because language helps us connect with others, it is also one of the foundations of our relationships. Building children’s language is one of the most powerful things adults can do to help set children up for their whole lives. And back-and-forth play is one of the best ways to do it.



## How play builds creativity

In play, children have opportunity to pretend and imagine. They are connected with others while those others also pretend and imagine. This teaches them what an idea is – and that it is fun to share ideas and to let ideas go out into the world in words and actions. In play, children learn how to initiate an idea, and how to respond to someone else’s idea. When they respond to someone else’s idea, this might give them a new idea of their own. This is creativity.



# What you can do to support children's play



- Set aside some times during the week to play with your child.
- Watch closely. Be on the lookout for what draws their interest. Follow their interest. This makes them a leader! If you 'take over' the game, they will always be stuck as the follower. Remember to let children lead. It might make the play silly at times – but it is that silliness which will connect you strongly.
- Children don't need expensive toys: they love to dress up, play make-believe, make things from cardboard boxes and other recycled objects, hide in cubbies made from sheets over chairs and so on. Play that uses the stuff from around the house is powerful for building creativity.
- Older children love board games. They love it when you play the game with them. Board games that take a very long time to play – like good ole Monopoly® – can lead to squabbles because the children start to get bored or frustrated and then it's not fun anymore. They lose the playfulness. Board games that can be enjoyed in half an hour or less are the best board games to start with. Computer games can also be fun to share with your child – but be mindful to limit time spent on these. Consider screen time as shared time.

- Outdoor play is so good for children because it mixes all the good things about play – social learning, language learning and creativity – with the good health of movement, physical exercise and being in nature. It’s also great to go outside during some of the time you set aside for play with your child each week.
- Messy play provides opportunities for children to feel and experience new sensations. And then of course they can help in cleaning it all up! So, it also teaches the responsibility of caring for the environment.

- It is important that when children are exploring ideas through play that we provide a supportive environment. Acknowledge and encourage their ideas and their efforts. This supports children to feel confident to have a go at new things in play, and to share their ideas. You can help them do this through encouragement and focusing on specific aspects of their play. For example, ask questions about children’s play in a way that allows them to talk about their ideas.
- Children need time for reflection and wonder. The pace of childhood is so much slower than our modern world, so make sure to go at children’s pace.





## The Power of Story

Sharing the stories of each other's lives activates empathy. Empathy is about connecting with the feelings and emotions that other people have. When we have empathy, we feel a little of what another person feels. We have a doorway into knowing a bit more about what it might be like to be them. It is like putting ourselves in their shoes.

For children, understanding of what it might feel like to have someone else's experiences, expands their understanding of the world. It gives them knowledge of a wider range of experiences. And it gives them a growing understanding of the many

ways that people feel and react. This supports the skills of social and emotional knowledge.

Hearing stories about others gives lots of opportunity to notice other people's emotions. And at the same time, it gives us all the opportunity to feel those emotions ourselves. By feeling other people's emotions, children have the chance to learn about those emotions.

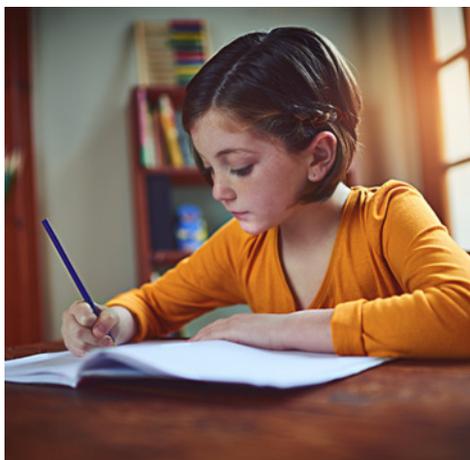
Good children's books always tell about the feelings of the characters. With an adult's support, good books make it possible for children to feel what the character feels. Reading

books that include feelings gives children ‘mini’ experiences of surprise, fear, anger, craziness and sadness, as well as enjoyment, wonder, hope, curiosity and much more. As a result, books give children lots of experiences that help to build empathy. And this supports their growing understanding of how to manage those feelings in the rough-and-tumble of childhood and living.

Remember that stories don’t all have to come out of books. Some of the best stories to tell children are the stories of our own childhoods! Or of what happened during our day. To tell about things that happened to you. About what you learned as well as what you did.

It is also fabulous to encourage children to tell their stories and to make up stories. Storytelling is an important language skill that is a lifelong skill. When children start school, this is the skill they need to use to write about topics a teacher might set.

To encourage children to tell their stories, we need to listen to them. And ask questions that show we are interested to hear more.



# Listening skills

Listening is not just about hearing – it is about paying attention.

To listen well we need to put down our phones or whatever distracts us and give our attention to children.

The way we use our faces and bodies shows a child if we are really giving our full attention or not. When giving full attention, it is usual to make good eye contact and use your facial expression

and posture to show that you are genuinely interested, and to avoid interrupting.

Children need us to be with them – to give them our attentive time and to enjoy time together. When we do this, it is not giving nothing(!), it is giving time and attention – and the connection that comes from time and attention is what really fires up development.

“ Parenting is much more than guidance and discipline. The context in which such interactions facilitate development ...is one of safety, comfort, support and reciprocal enjoyment and sharing.”

Daniel Hughes



# Bringing it all together with added nourishment



Mealtimes can be especially good for paying attention and for sharing stories and listening. Children love it. Bring playfulness to the conversation. Tell your stories and listen to theirs. Ask questions.

Be creative about mealtimes. For example, spread a rug and have a picnic in the garden – or on the loungeroom floor(!); or have dinner under the table instead of on it(!); or in a cubby house made of furniture and rugs; or on the ‘mountain’ that was built in the day’s play. These playful ways of sharing food can also add

wonder and fun to the connection and relationship you build with children. All of these experiences are opportunities for talking points with children. For example, talking about the good and not so good things about eating under the table, and whether eating soup under the table is a good idea, or would another food be better.

When we add playfulness and kindness and enjoyment and empathy and story to the time shared with children, we really boost children’s communication development and emotional wellbeing.

And not only theirs – ours too.



Everybody plays. Whether it's playing a game, playing sport, playing an instrument or performing a play, everyone finds activities that they love. Playing together is also the most beautiful way to share your own passion with your children and for them to discover with you the things that are important to them.

As we grow older, some people find it hard to play and embrace their inner child. We all perform an important role in supporting children during play or when they are singing or dancing. Playing dress-ups is also an important part of children experiencing playing different characters.

“Life is more fun if you play games.”  
Roald Dahl, My Uncle Oswald



## Developing a culture of participation

It is important to remember that when children are learning, or doing something that they have not experienced before, you may find that they are a bit unsure.

For example, some children may prefer to sit and observe play, while others may just explore the room and However, not appear to be actively taking part. you would be surprised how much they are taking in and learning.

Or some children may require support from an adult or another child to join in. In these instances an adult may provide that support by encouraging

them and joining in as well. Joining in is a skill that children learn. Our role is to support them to do that in a way that is ok for them.

If you ask children what type of music they like, it is probably based on the music that their parents or siblings listen to. Broadening children's music experience is as simple as introducing new songs or music to children. Remember, they rely on the adult's enthusiasm and participation as to whether they will enjoy the experience. It is important to model enjoyment and fun when engaging in activities with children. If you appear to be bored or not happy, they will respond in the same way.

Also, as children become older their taste in music is likely to change as they gain access to different styles of music.

# Activities and ideas to try

## Creating opportunities to make music with kids is fun!



Singing is the basis for all musical learning, and remember you do not need instruments or special equipment to encourage a love of music. Children who listen to a variety of musical styles are able to understand music better because they begin to recognise the patterns that they hear. In the same way, children learn to read as they begin to recognise patterns in words.

Sing about anything and everything. For example,

when kids are washing their hands, you can sing 'this is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands, wash our hands...'; 'this is the way we 'blow our nose...' 'this is the way we pick up the toys, pick up the toys...' and so on. The sillier the song, the more enjoyment kids will have singing. An important point to remember is that the more sound effects and exaggerated actions you include the better!!

You do not need to be a professional singer to sing and have fun with kids. The most important thing is that you have a go. When kids see you have fun singing, they are more likely to join in.

Use the tune of 'Old MacDonald had a farm', but substitute it with a child's name, and let the kids come up with ideas for all the animals.



Play clapping rhyme games: 'A sailor went to sea, sea, sea', 'Everybody clapping, clapping, everybody clapping just like me'. Why not add your own ideas, jumping, hopping, crawling and so on? 'If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands' (include sad, angry, tired etc).

Another fun song for young children is 'Heads and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes, or eyes and ears and mouth and nose, mouth and nose', and pointing to parts of the body as you sing together.

Or try this one: 'Open shut them, open shut them, give a little clap. Open shut them, open shut them, lay them in your lap. Creep them,

creep them, creep them, creep them, right up to your chin. Open wide your little mouth, but do not let them in' (actions: kids open and shut their hands, hands creep up to their chin, and they open their mouth and quickly move their hands behind their back).



Turn kitchen items into instruments!

Spoons are great for banging together, plastic containers bang together, wooden spoons and pots and pans for a drum kit!

Sleep time or rest time is a good time to wind down with relaxation music. For example, put on a CD of lullabies or relaxation music, or sing a favourite lullaby.



## Introducing children to different types of music

It can be as simple as putting on some ABCfm, trying some Beatles, maybe a musical theatre album from Andrew Lloyd Webber, some jazz or even your favourite songs from when you were young.

There is a fantastic Spotify playlist called, 1001 songs you must hear before you die, – try putting it on shuffle and enjoy listening to some familiar classics as well as songs you may never have heard.

Put it on in the background, and you will find they absorb it like sponges.

# Acknowledgements

Authors: Rosalie Martin and Ian Williams

Photography: Kate Gillham

Rosie Martin, Speech Pathology Tasmania

Ian Williams, The ExitLeft Performance Academy

Design and Layout: Digital Ink

Printed by Mercury Walch

**Children featured in photos:**

Lily Cantrell, Amelia Cantrell, Gaurav Rana, Elisha Rana,  
Emma Odwogo, Georgia Clark, Ruby Clark, Isabella Whitney

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ISBN: 978-0-9924923-5-9