

“Special Play Time:” What Is It and How Can It Help?

This technique is a way to strengthen the relationship between a parent and a child by using 30-minute playtimes once a week.

Play

is important to children because it is the most natural way children communicate. Toys are like words for children and play is their language. Adults talk about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Children use toys to explore their experiences and express what they think and how they feel. Therefore, parents are taught to have special structured 30-minute playtimes with their child using a kit of carefully selected toys in their own home. Parents learn how to respond empathically to their child’s feelings, build their child’s self-esteem, help their child learn self-control and self-responsibility, and set therapeutic limits during these special playtimes.

For 30 minutes each week, the child is the center of the parent’s universe. In this special playtime, the parent creates an accepting relationship in which a child feels completely safe to express himself through his play—fears, likes, dislikes, wishes, anger, loneliness, joy, or feelings of failure. This is not a typical playtime. It is a special playtime in which the child leads and the parent follows. In this special relationship, there are no:

- + Reprimands
- + Put-downs
- + Evaluations
- + Requirements (to draw pictures a certain way, etc.)
- + Judgments (about the child or his play as being good or bad, right or wrong)

How Can It Help My Child?

In the special playtimes, you will build a different kind of relationship with your child, and your child will discover that she is capable, important, understood, and accepted as she is. When children experience a play relationship in which they feel accepted, understood, and cared for, they play out many of their problems and, in the process, release tensions, feelings, and burdens. Your child will then feel better about herself and will be able to discover her own strengths and assume greater self-responsibility as she takes charge of play situations.

How your child feels about herself will make a significant difference in her behavior.

In the special playtimes where you learn to focus on your child rather than your child’s problem, your child will begin to react differently because how your child behaves, how she thinks, and how she performs in school are directly related to how she feels about herself. When your child feels better about herself, she will behave in more self-enhancing ways rather than self-defeating ways.

Basic Principles for Play Sessions:

1. The parent sets the stage by structuring an atmosphere in which the **child feels free** to determine how he will use the time during the 30-minute play session. The **child leads** the play and the **parent follows**. The parent follows the child's lead by showing keen interest and carefully observing the child's play, **without making suggestions or asking questions**, and by actively joining in the play when invited by the child. For 30 minutes, you (parent) are "dumb" and don't have the answers; it is up to your child to make his own decisions and find his own solutions.
2. The parent's major task is to empathize with the child: to understand the child's thoughts, feelings, and intent expressed in play by working hard to **see and experience the child's play through the child's eyes**. This task is operationalized by conveying the "Be With" Attitudes below.
3. The parent is then to **communicate this understanding to the child** by: a) verbally describing what the child is doing/playing, b) verbally reflecting what the child is saying, and c) most importantly, by verbally reflecting the feelings that the child is actively experiencing through his play.
4. The parent is to be clear and firm about the few "limits" that are placed on the child's behavior. Limits are stated in a way that give the child responsibility for his actions and behaviors—helping to foster self-control. Limits to be set are: time limits, not breaking toys or damaging items in the play area, and not physically hurting self or parent. **Limits are to be stated only when needed**, but applied consistently across sessions. (Specific examples of when and how to set limits will be taught over the next several weeks; you will also have lots of opportunities to practice this very important skill.)

"Be With" Attitudes:

Your intent in your actions, presence, and responses is what is most important and should convey to your child:

"I am here—I hear/see you—I understand—I care."

Goals of the Play Sessions:

1. To allow the child—through the medium of play—to communicate thoughts, needs, and feelings to his parent, and for the parent to communicate that understanding back to the child.
2. Through feeling accepted, understood, and valued—for the child to experience more positive feelings of self-respect, self-worth, confidence, and competence—and ultimately develop self-control, responsibility for actions, and learn to get needs met in appropriate ways.
3. To strengthen the parent-child relationship and foster a sense of trust, security, and closeness for both parent and child.
4. To increase the level of playfulness and enjoyment between parent and child.

Toy Checklist for Special PlayTime

Note: Obtain sturdy cardboard box with sturdy lid to store toys in (box that copier paper comes in is ideal—the deep lid becomes a dollhouse). Use an old quilt or blanket to spread toys out on and to serve as a boundary for the play area.

Real-Life Toys (also promote imaginative play)

- Small baby doll: *should not be anything “special”; can be extra one that child does not play with anymore*
- Nursing bottle: *real one so it can be used by the child to put a drink in during the session*
- Doctor kit (with stethoscope): *add three Band-Aids for each session (add disposable gloves/Ace bandage, if you have)*
- Toy phones: *recommend getting two in order to communicate: one cell, one regular*
- Small dollhouse: *use deep lid of box the toys are stored in—draw room divisions, windows, doors, and so forth inside of lid*
- Doll family: *bendable mother, father, brother, sister, baby, and so forth (ethnically representative)*
- Play money: *bills and coins; credit card is optional*
- Couple of domestic and wild animals: *if you don’t have doll family, can substitute an animal family (e.g., horse, cow family)*
- Car/Truck: *one to two small ones (could make specific to child’s needs, e.g., an ambulance)*
- Kitchen dishes: *couple of plastic dishes, cups, and eating utensils*

Optional

- Puppets: *one aggressive, one gentle; can be homemade or purchased (animal shaped cooking mittens, etc.)*
- Doll furniture: *for a bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen*
- Dress up: *hand mirror, bandana, scarf; small items you already have around the house*

Acting-Out Aggressive Toys (also promote imaginative play)

- Dart guns with a couple of darts and a target: *parent needs to know how to operate*
- Rubber knife: *small, bendable, army type*
- Rope: *prefer soft rope (can cut the ends off jump rope)*
- Aggressive animal: *(e.g., snake, shark, lion, dinosaurs—strongly suggest hollow shark!)*
- Small toy soldiers (12–15): *two different colors to specify two teams or good guys/bad guys*
- Inflatable bop bag (Bobo clown style preferable)
- Mask: *Lone Ranger type*

Optional

- Toy handcuffs with a key

Toys for Creative/Emotional Expression

- Playdough: *suggest a cookie sheet to put playdough on to contain mess—also serves as a flat surface for drawing*
- Crayons: *eight colors, break some and peel paper off (markers are optional for older children but messier)*
- Plain paper: *provide a few pieces of new paper for each session*
- Scissors: *not pointed, but cut well (e.g., child Fiskars.)*
- Transparent tape: *remember, child can use up all of this, so buy several of smaller size*
- Egg carton, styrofoam cup/bowl: *for destroying, breaking, or coloring*
- Ring toss game
- Deck of playing cards
- Soft foam ball
- Two balloons per play session

Optional

- Selection of arts/crafts materials in a ziplock bag *(e.g., colored construction paper, glue, yarn, buttons, beads, scraps of fabrics, raw noodles, etc —much of this depends on age of child)*
- Tinkertoys/small assortment of building blocks
- Binoculars
- Tambourine, drum, or other small musical instrument
- Magic wand

Reminder: *Toys need not be new or expensive. Avoid selecting more toys than will fit in a box—toys should be small. In some cases, additional toys can be added based on child’s need and with therapist approval. If unable to get every toy before first play session, obtain several from each category—ask therapist for help in prioritizing. Note: Unwrap any new toys or take out of box before play session. Toys should look inviting.*

Play Session Do's & Don'ts

Parents: Your major task is to keenly show interest in your child's play and to communicate your interest in, and understanding of, your child's thoughts, feelings, and behavior through your words, actions, and undivided focus on your child.

Do:

1. Do set the stage.

- Prepare play area ahead of time (old blanket can be used to establish a visual boundary of the play area, as well as provide protection for flooring; a cookie sheet under the arts/crafts materials provides a hard surface for playdough, drawing, and gluing, and provides ease of clean up).
- Display the toys in a consistent manner around the perimeter of the play area.
- Convey freedom of the special playtime through your words: "During our special playtime, you can play with the toys in lots of the ways you'd like to."
- Allow your child to lead by returning responsibility to your child by responding, "That's up to you," "You can decide," or "That can be whatever you want it to be."

2. Do let the child lead.

Allowing the child to lead during the playtime helps you to better understand your child's world and what your child needs from you. Convey your willingness

to follow your child's lead through your responses: "Show me what you want me to do," "You want me to put that on," "Hmmm...", or "I wonder..." Use whisper technique (co-conspirators) when child wants you to play a role: "What should I say?" or "What happens next?" (Modify responses for older kids: use conspiratorial tone, "What happens now?" "What kind of teacher am I?" etc.)

3. Do join in the child's play actively, as a follower.

Convey your willingness to follow your child's lead through your responses and your actions, by actively joining in the play (child is the director, parent is the actor): "So I'm supposed to be the teacher," "You want me to be the robber, and I'm supposed to wear the black mask," "Now I'm supposed to pretend I'm locked up in jail, until you say I can get out," or "You want me to stack these just as high as yours." Use whisper technique in role-play: "What should I say?" "What happens next?"

4. Do verbally track the child's play (describe what you see).

Verbally tracking your child's play is a way of letting your child know that you are paying close attention and that you are interested and involved: "You're filling that all the way to the top," "You've decided you want to paint next," or "You've got 'em all lined up just how you want them."

5. Do reflect the child's feelings.

Verbally reflecting children's feelings helps them feel understood and communicates your acceptance of their feelings and needs: "You're proud of your picture," "That kind of surprised you," "You really like how that feels on your hands," "You really wish that we could play longer," "You don't like the way that turned out," or "You sound disappointed." (Hint: Look closely at your child's face to better identify how your child is feeling.)

6. Do set firm and consistent limits.

Consistent limits create a structure for a safe and predictable environment for children. Children should never be permitted to hurt themselves or you. Limit setting provides an opportunity for your child to develop self-control and self-responsibility. Using a calm, patient, yet firm voice, say, "The floor's not for putting playdough on; you can play with it on the tray" or "I know you'd like to shoot the gun at me, but I'm not for shooting. You can choose to shoot at that"(point to something acceptable).

7. Do salute the child's power and encourage effort.

Verbally recognizing and encouraging your child's effort builds self-esteem and confidence and promotes self-motivation: "You worked hard on that!" "You did it!" "You figured it out!" "You've got a plan for how you're gonna set those up," "You know just how you want that to be," or "Sounds like you know lots about how to take care of babies."

8. Do be verbally active.

Being verbally active communicates to your child that you are interested and involved in her play. If you are silent, your child will feel watched.

Note: Empathic grunts—"Hm..."and so forth—also convey interest and involvement, when you are unsure of how to respond.

Don't:

- Don't criticize any behavior.
- Don't praise the child.
- Don't ask leading questions.
- Don't allow interruptions of the session.
- Don't give information or teach.
- Don't preach.
- Don't initiate new activities.
- Don't be passive or quiet.

(Don'ts 1-7 are taken from Guerney, 1972)

Remember the "Be With" Attitudes: Your intent in your responses is what is most important. Convey to your child:

"I am here—I hear/see you—I understand—I care."

Play Session Procedures Checklist

A. Prior to Session (Remember to “Set the Stage”)

- Make arrangements for other family members (so that there will be no interruptions).
- Set up toys on old quilt—keep toy placement predictable.
- Have a clock visible in the room (or wear a watch).
- Put pets outside or in another room.
- Let the child use the bathroom prior to the play session.
- Switch on video recorder.

B. Beginning the Session

- Child and Parent: Hang “Do Not Disturb” sign (can also “unplug” phone if there is one in play session area).
Message to child: “This is so important that No One is allowed to interrupt this time together.”

- Tell Child: “We will have 30 minutes of special playtime, and you can play with the toys in lots of the ways you want to.”

(Voice needs to convey that parent is looking forward to this time with child.)

- From this point, let the child lead.

C. During the Session

- Sit on the same level as child, close enough to show interest but allowing enough space for child to move freely.
- Focus your eyes, ears, and body fully on child. (Toes Follow Nose!) Conveys full attention!
- Your voice should mostly be gentle and caring, but vary with the intensity and affect of child’s play.
- Allow the child to identify the toys. [To promote make-believe play (i.e., what looks like a car to you might be a spaceship to your child), try to use nonspecific words (“this,” “that,” “it”) if child hasn’t named toy.]
- Play actively with the child, if the child requests your participation.
- Verbally reflect what you see and hear (child’s play/activity, thoughts, feelings).
- Set limits on behaviors that make you feel uncomfortable.
- Give five-minute advance notice for session’s end and then a one-minute notice. (“**Billy, we have five minutes left in our special playtime.**”)

D. Ending the Session

- At 30 minutes, stand and announce, “**Our playtime is over for today.**” Do not exceed time limit by more than two to three minutes.

- Parent does the cleaning up. If child chooses, child may help. (If child continues to play while “cleaning,” set limit below.)

- If child has difficulty leaving:

- ✓ Open the door or begin to put away toys.

- ✓ Reflect child’s feelings about not wanting to leave, but calmly and firmly restate that the playtime is over. (Restate limit as many times as needed—the goal is for child to be able to stop herself.)

“**I know you would like to stay and play with the toys, but our special playtime is over for today.**”

- ✓ Adding a statement that gives child something to look forward to helps child see that, although she cannot continue to play with the special toys, there is something else she can do that is also enjoyable.

For example:

1. “**You can play with the toys next week during our special playtime.**”

2. “**It’s time for snack; would you like grapes or cherries today?**”

3. “**We can go outside and play on the trampoline.**”

Note: Patience is the order of the day when helping child to leave—OK to repeat limit calmly several times to allow child to struggle with leaving on her own. (Key is showing empathy and understanding in your voice tone and facial expressions as you state the limit). Younger children may need more time to ‘hear’ limit and respond.

Never use Special Playtime for a reward or consequence—NO matter the child’s behavior that day!

Limit-Setting: A-C-T Before It's Too Late!

Acknowledge the feeling
Communicate the limit
Target alternatives

Three Step A-C-T Method of Limit Setting:

Scenario: Billy has been pretending that the bop bag is a bad guy and shooting him with the dart gun; he looks over at you and aims the dart gun at you, then laughs and says, "Now, you're one of the bad guys, too!"

1. **Acknowledge** your child's feeling or desire (*your voice must convey empathy and understanding*). **"Billy, I know that you think that it would be fun to shoot me, too..."**
Child learns that his feelings, desires, and wishes are valid and accepted by parent (but not all behavior); just empathically reflecting your child's feeling often defuses the intensity of the feeling or need.
2. **Communicate the limit** (be specific and clear—and brief).
"But I'm not for shooting."
3. **Target acceptable alternatives** (provide one or more choices, depending on age of child).
"You can pretend that the doll is me (pointing at the doll) and shoot at it."
The goal is to provide your child with an acceptable outlet for expressing the feeling or the original action, while giving him an opportunity to exercise self-control. Note: Pointing helps redirect child's attention.

When to Set Limits?

👉 **RULE OF THUMB: "During play sessions, limits are not needed until they are needed!"**

Limits are set only when the need arises, and for four basic reasons:

- ✓ To protect child from hurting himself or parent
- ✓ To protect valuable property
- ✓ To maintain parent's acceptance of child
- ✓ To provide consistency in the play session by limiting child and toys to play area and ending on time

Before setting a limit in a play session, ask yourself:

- ✓ "Is this limit necessary?"
- ✓ "Can I consistently enforce this limit?"
- ✓ "If I don't set a limit on this behavior, can I consistently allow this behavior and accept my child?"

Avoid conducting play sessions in areas of the house that require too many limits. Limits set during play sessions should allow for greater freedom of expression than would normally be allowed. The fewer the limits, the easier it is for you to be consistent—**consistency is very important**. Determine a few limits ahead of time (practice A-C-T): no hitting or shooting at parent; no playdough on carpet; no purposefully breaking toys, and so forth. *Hint: Children really do understand that playtimes are "special" and that the rules are different—they will not expect the same level of permissiveness during the rest of the week.*

How to Set Limits?

Limits are not punitive and should be stated firmly, but calmly and matter-of-factly. After empathically acknowledging your child's feeling or desire (very important step), you state, "The playdough is not for throwing at the table," just like you would state, "The sky is blue." Don't try to force your child to obey the limit. Remember to provide an acceptable alternative. In this method, it really is up to the child to decide to accept or break the limit; however, **it is your job, as the parent, to consistently enforce the limit.**

Why Establish Consistent Limits?

Providing children with consistent limits helps them feel safe and secure. This method of limiting children's behavior teaches them self-control and responsibility for their own behavior by allowing them to experience the consequences of their choices and decisions. Limits set in play sessions help children practice self-control and begin to learn to stop themselves in the real world.

CONSISTENT LIMITS → PREDICTABLE, SAFE ENVIRONMENT → SENSE OF SECURITY

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Play Session Skills Checklist

(Note: Indicate ✓ in column if skill was used; — if skill was not used; and + if skill was a strength)

✓	—	+	Skill	Notes/Comments
			Set the Stage/Structured Play Session	
			Conveyed "Be With" Attitudes	
			Full attention/interested	
			Toes followed nose	
			Allowed Child to Lead	
			Avoided giving suggestions	
			Avoided asking questions	
			Returned responsibility to child	
			Followed Child's Lead	
			Physically on child's level	
			Moved closer when child was involved in play	
			Joined in play when invited	
			<u><i>Reflective Responding Skills:</i></u>	
			Reflected child's nonverbal play (Tracking)	
			Reflected child's verbalizations (Content)	
			Reflected child's feelings/wants/wishes	
			Voice tone matched child's intensity/affect	
			Responses were brief and interactive	
			Facial expressions matched child's affect	
			Use of Encouragement/Self-Esteem-Building Responses	
			Set Limits, As Needed, Using A-C-T	