Supporting children’s wellbeing through play: Suggestions for families and staff

Children’s play builds social and emotional skills and nurtures and develops children’s mental health and wellbeing. Some of the ways that adults can support children’s play include:

**Helping children feel safe and be safe**

It is the responsibility of adults to ensure that children feel safe to play as they want to. Adult supervision and guidance when needed can ensure that children are playing safely and are not at risk of hurting themselves or anyone else around them. Adults can provide children with safe boundaries and limits on their play to ensure that it is a positive experience for all.

**Providing a time and a place for play**

Try to make it possible for children to finish play that they are very involved in before having to move on to do something else. If something else can’t wait, give children warning of the change. The play space may be able to be protected so the game can be continued later. For example, providing a play table rather than using the kitchen table as a play space (which has to be cleared for meals), enables play experiences to be stopped and started by the child.

**Following the child’s lead**

Children need opportunities to play and work out feelings in their own way. Adults may show support by being near, noticing and accepting what the child is playing rather than directing or taking the lead away from the child. For example, when the adult says ‘I see you are singing your baby to sleep in the cradle’ they are supporting the child’s play. If the adult said ‘Now the baby is asleep what do you think the mother will do next?’, they are directing and taking the lead away from the child.

**Offering guidance**

Play is also an important time for teaching children about relationships. Just having an adult sitting near a game to watch and occasionally comment on what is happening can help children to notice how their behaviour might be affecting others and develop empathy for others. For example, a supportive adult might say ‘I can see that Victor is not letting Amar play and Amar looks sad and left out’. You could also ask Amar how he feels and Victor what he is wanting from the game. Children need the support of adults to learn how to manage their feelings and social situations. A child may need an adult to be near to help her to feel safe and included and able to talk about how she feels. Some children may need a little encouragement from a supportive adult to know how to get started or to feel comfortable enough to join in. Others may need help to share the play and not exclude a child. This is essential social learning. Most children need help to negotiate these things and adults need to be aware and available to help when needed.
Providing things for children to play with

Children will find many things to play with around the house or outside in the garden, in parks and playgrounds. These include things like pots and pans to put things in and pour with, low walls to walk along, cushions to crawl over, pegs to put into small holes and sort into colours, everyday clothes to dress up in, and brooms and garden spades to practise being grown up. Seeing what your child enjoys doing will give you more ideas of the things they may like to play with. They may ask for particular toys or books that relate to their current interests, and finding children something they really love can help them to know their likes and dislikes are valued and respected and helps build their sense of self.

The best playthings encourage creative play and can be used for many things as the child grows. These include:

- bats and balls
- paper to draw on and various drawing materials (pencils, textas, crayons and paints)
- blocks
- dress-ups, dolls, puppets and toy animals
- sandpits, water and mud
- things to push, pull and ride on (e.g., cars and trucks, wagons and tricycles)
- containers of all shapes and sizes
- playdough and clay
- musical instruments
- songs, stories and books.

Providing opportunities for children to play with others

Children benefit from playing on their own, with other children of varying ages and with adults. However children can easily become overwhelmed and tired if there are too many children or not enough things to go around. Adults can support children’s play by keeping playdates manageable for the child, not too long and not too many people.

Play is not all fun and games

Play can be a healing experience for a child because it involves the child feeling secure in their relationships with adults and feeling free to be themselves. However, as well as providing pleasure and joy, play can also involve a child feeling hurt, disappointed or frustrated. This can happen in both individual play and in social play with other children, where a child’s need for belonging or power can become hurtful either to themselves or to others. This can lead to children being excluded or excluding others. Adult supervision and guidance is important to protect the wellbeing of young children.

Encouraging children to have more than one playmate and helping them to manage temporary disappointment helps them to deal with occasionally being left out, which happens to most of us at some point in our lives. However when there are ongoing patterns of exclusion or unfair use of power, children need adults to help them to express their feelings and get their needs met. This is crucial for a child’s developing sense of self and their mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au). The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.

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