

BRINGING THE LESSONS HOME *for Families and Caregivers*



THE MAGIC OF PLAY AND HOW PARENTS CAN SUPPORT IT AT HOME

Dr. Stuart Brown, a play researcher and the founder of the [National Institute for Play](#), once said “We are built to play, and we are built by play.” More simply put, when children play, they are building skills for life. Play helps children to learn how to make decisions independently, grow confidence, and develop healthy relationships.

Play is a natural part of child development, and caregivers can support the wellbeing of their children by intentionally allowing them time to play freely. Families don't have to feel pressure to always create “experiences” for their kids. In fact, research tells us that the most beneficial types of play allow children full freedom to choose what and how to play so that they can create and imagine a world for themselves. So how can parents support healthy free play opportunities for their children?

1. MAKE SPACE

Having a dedicated space in your home, even if it's just a small corner in a centrally located place, can encourage free play at different times of the day including before school, while dinner is being made, or in between sports practices. Consider adding open-ended, often called *expressive toys*, to this space. Open-ended toys can be played with in a variety of ways and expand imagination. These include blocks, dolls, figurines, art supplies, or pretend food. This space should be free of electronics and technology.

2. LET THEM PLAY ALONE (UNLESS YOU ARE INVITED TO PLAY!)

Good news: It's ok to let your children play alone without adult interaction! In fact, independent play encourages creativity, supports social skills, allows for problem-solving, and fosters decision-making. Sometimes, children *need* to play by themselves or with a friend or sibling without an adult interfering. Other times, they crave adult attention. Unless your child specifically invites you to play, give them space to imagine and explore on their own.

3. WHEN INVITED TO PLAY, LET THEM LEAD

Let's face it, kids are rarely in charge of their own time. Whether at school, during extracurricular activities, at mealtimes, and even during their bedtime routine, children are constantly being told what to do and how to do it. That's why it is so important to let your child lead, even when they invite you to join in on their play. Letting your child lead means giving them the opportunity to tell YOU what to do and how to do it. If your child asks you to eat a bowl of pretend soup, play along and slurp away! If you are invited to be a monster, consider whispering in their ear, “what kind of monster should I be?” This allows children to be in control of the story they are creating through play.

Children are experts in play so that you don't have to be! Sit back, relax, and let your children do what they do best.