

Playtime is Important Time
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Unstructured, non-planned play time is not a waste of time – quite the contrary it is a necessity. In today’s world, many families are stressed and pulled in different directions in their efforts to give children every advantage. This often means frantic transportation between events, lessons and structured activities. Achieving balance is not easy but it is so important for the well-being of our children.

Play therapists have long known the importance of play in development and promoting self regulation skills. Self regulation is a critical skill for all children. Being able to soothe when provided soothing, being able to calm when provided reassurance and able to relax when nurtured are critical skills that translate into adulthood and the ability to modulate all life’s storms. Unfortunately, most of the activities that children occupy themselves with today – watching television, playing video games or taking lessons - do not promote self-regulation.

The importance of play is demonstrated through research. In a recent article by Alix Spiegel for the National Public Radio website, “Old Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills,” child researchers provided alternative play options that promote the development of self regulation. These are worthwhile activities to support and promote for the ultimate achievement of self-regulation within your child.

Here are their valuable and easily achieved suggestions:

Simon Says: Simon Says is a game that requires children to inhibit themselves. You have to think and not do something which helps to build self-regulation.

Complex Imaginative Play: This is play where your child plans scenarios and enacts those scenarios for a fair amount of time, a half-hour at a minimum though longer is better. Sustained play that last for hours is best. Realistic props are good for very young children, but otherwise encourage kids to use symbolic props that they create and make through their imaginations. For example, a stick can become a sword, a fishing pole, or a magic wand.

Activities That Require Planning: Games with directions, patterns for construction, recipes for cooking, for instance.

Joint Storybook Reading: “Reading storybooks with preschoolers promotes self-regulation, not just because it fosters language development, but because children’s stories are filled with characters who model effective self-regulatory strategies,” says Laura Berk, professor of psychology at Illinois State University. Berk cites the classic children’s storybook, *The Little Engine That Could*, in which a little blue engine pulling a train of toys and food over a mountain breaks down and must find a way to complete its journey. With persistence and effort

and chanting “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can,” the engine eventually reaches its goal.

Encourage Children to Talk to Themselves

“Like adults, children spontaneously speak to themselves to guide and manage their own behavior,” Berk says. “In fact, children often use self-guiding comments recently picked up from their interactions with adults, signaling that they are beginning to apply those strategies to themselves. Permitting and encouraging children to be verbally active – to speak to themselves while engaged in challenging tasks – fosters concentration, effort, problem-solving and task success.”