**Bonding with Kids Through Play**

Difficult as it may be, it’s important to get down on the floor for playtime with your children. Here’s why and some tips to help you overcome your discomfort.

*By Mimi Slawoff*

On her days off from her job as an attorney, Julia Diamond would often find herself running down a hallway with a ninja sword or playing army with her two sons.

“I could handle this type of play for about half an hour, after that I would come up with ways to extricate myself, making excuses to do something else,” says Diamond, admitting that she found this kind of play boring – even difficult – at times.

While not all parents find it a chore to get down on the floor with a child and build forts or make stuffed animals talk, many do. Shedding our adult roles and crossing the bridge into the world of make-believe is often a bumpy path with no road signs. We know we should play with our children – and we want to – but may find it tedious and tiring.

But for children, play is natural – it’s how they learn about themselves, their environment and the people around them. Fantasy play for young children is a way to try on adult roles and skills.

Studies show that through play children learn to take the perspective of others; they learn self-control and the ability to take turns. Children who play make-believe or games with rules are more empathetic, less physically aggressive and more cooperative with other children and adults.

“Children who engage in fantasy play in first and second grade are the most creative problem-solvers as fifth and sixth graders,” says Sandra Russ, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University who specializes in children’s play.

Yet, in recent years, many preschools have been placing more emphasis on academic learning than outright play. In addition, organized activities, TV and computers take time away from free play. So it’s increasingly up to parents to make sure children get enough playtime. And, by actively engaging with children in their play, parents not only promote the benefits of play, they also get to know their kids better and strengthen the parent-child bond.

**Parent-Child Play**

Parent-child play is profoundly meaningful and has more value than adults may think psychologists point out.

“Play allows parents to enter a child’s world, on the child’s terms, in order to foster closeness, confidence and connection,” says Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., a psychologist, play therapist and author of *Playful Parenting*. “Playing is how children show themselves to us. It’s also a way to be close and to reconnect after closeness has
been severed [by an argument or conflict]. The more we join them in their world, the more cooperative they will be when we drag them along to ours.”

Most parents understand the importance of bonding with infants through eye contact and cuddling, but as children grow, many of us spend less one-on-one time with our kids. By keeping parent-child play alive throughout childhood, parents can foster an ongoing connection.

Playing can be a way to find out what’s going on in children’s lives. With their dolls or action figures, children often replay scenes from their lives, putting their own emotional spin on the day’s events. Joining them gives parents insight into their thoughts and concerns, enabling them to help them find solutions to conflicts.

Diamond says she often found herself in the role of the fall guy during combat play with her sons, creating various scenarios with army men, jeeps and action figures.

“I learned a lot about boys,” she says. “By being willing to get on the floor and actually play with them and show an interest in their toys and, later, in their paintball guns and computer games, I think they came to respect me because I was always interested in what they did and what they had to say.”

Stanley Greenspan, M.D., a clinical professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at George Washington University School of Medicine and author of many influential parenting books, says interactive play with their parents helps children develop the social skills necessary for getting along with others and is core to their healthy development.

When you play with your children, Greenspan says, “you’re not only connecting and engaging, you’re exchanging back-and-forth emotional signals, which is helping the child regulate mood and behavior, learning to read social signals and learning to communicate. Each of these abilities contributes to a child’s sense of security.

Rediscovering the Joy of Play

Somewhere between adolescence and young adulthood people lose the joy of playing, Cohen notes. Work, stress and the demands of daily life replace playtime. The more serious or dignified we have to be at work, or the more stressful our lives, the harder it can be to loosen up and play with the freedom and abandon that our children love.

“Sometimes it’s work mustering up enthusiasm when you feel bored and listless,” Cohen says. But with commitment and practice, grown-ups can rediscover the joys of playing.

Give yourself permission to admit that play can be boring, says Susan Oliver, a mother of three and executive director of Playing for Keeps, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting healthy, constructive, nonviolent play. “While it’s hard to relax and give yourself over to play, view this time with your children as an adventure,” she says.

For starters, your role can actually be quite minimal and the play you undertake can be almost any activity – from board games and dress-up to wrestling and storytelling. Enjoying nature walks together and collecting colorful stones count as play, too, Oliver says.
For children, play means that every pot and pan in the kitchen can be a musical instrument and every rock in the yard can be a pirate ship. Adults have to remember that play is not something that only has to happen when we’re playing, Cohen says. We can play while we’re grocery shopping, reading bedtime stories or getting ready for school.

**Transition, Focus and Stretch**

To find the way down the rabbit hole into a magical children’s world, Cohen suggests making a conscious transition from work – or whatever else you’re doing – to play: Change into play clothes. Set a timer for half an hour or an hour. During this time, give your child 100 percent of your attention – no phone calls, no preparing dinner.

“Your goal is to reach out to your child and enter his or her zone,” Cohen says.

For many parents, it’s hard to play games they didn’t grow up playing. Because of this, moms and dads generally revert to traditional gender roles – dads roughhouse and play catch, while moms do art and play dolls. “I always encourage parents to extend their boundaries a bit,” says Cohen.

Many parents tense up without realizing it, notes Greenspan. “Relax and play things you like, too. Don’t feel like you need to make something happen during play. Instead, try to follow your child’s natural interests. Let your child direct.”

If your child isn’t asking you to play, prompt her with, “Let’s play.” Or simply join in with whatever your child is playing. As play becomes more routine in your family life, you’ll find it can also ease the stress of parenting, says Cohen. In *Playful Parenting*, he discusses ways to incorporate playfulness into daily life to effectively deal with issues such as tantrums, anxiety, sibling rivalry and even rebellious teen behavior.

While there’s no magic number of hours that you should play with your child, experienced parents learn that playtime is time well spent.

“As bored as I was many times when we sat playing with all those micro machines and action figures, I wouldn’t trade a moment of it,” says Diamond, whose oldest son is now 16. “He still comes to me all the time and wants my input since he knows I’m truly interested. I really believe that has come from the tremendous amount of time we have spent together in all kinds of play and activity over the last 16 years.”

**RESOURCES**


**Make Your Own Preschool Games**, by Sally Goldberg, Ph.D., Perseus Publishing, 2002. Offers quick, low-cost activities that use materials found in most homes.

**Playful Parenting**, by Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., Ballantine, 2002. Packed with parenting theory and tips for every type of play you can imagine, this book is loaded with anecdotes sure to encourage parents.

*Mimi Slawoff is a freelance writer and the mother of three.*