

Emerging Minds

National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Parent-child play: Practice resource



This resource compliments the practice paper ‘Parent-child play: A mental health promotion strategy for all children’.

It has two components: a conversation guide that practitioners can work through with families, and practitioner notes that provide support for introducing parent-child play and using the conversation guide.

The conversation guide is for use with families who are interested in working on their playtime. It has four key stages:

1. Exploring play experiences and benefits.
2. Building parent capacity for child-led shared play.
3. Creating opportunities for shared child-parent play.
4. Reflecting on play experiences.

Note: The tool is best completed for one child at a time. Where this approach may be helpful for more than one child in a family, you may repeat the process or parts of the process as appropriate for other children.

The practitioner’s notes offer information to support conversations with families about parent-child play in conjunction with the conversation guide. These notes are offered as a guide, and it is expected that you will develop your own approach to suit your setting, client group, skills and experience.



Practitioner’s notes for conversation guide

Introducing parent-child play to parents: When and how?

All children benefit from their parents engaging with them in play. Increasing shared child-parent playtime may be particularly helpful for some families, including:

- parents who are working on their connection with their child
- parents who need support to see their child’s

perspective, as a result of their own current experience of adversity

- parents who need support in understanding the effects of their own adversity on their child
- families experiencing adversity that impacts children (e.g. physical or mental illness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction or housing instability)
- children who may need support with their mental health; and
- children experiencing stressful times.

Shared playtime can be included as part of a treatment strategy for any of the situations listed above.

Practitioners may begin by acknowledging any concerns the parent has raised by reflecting these concerns back to the parent. Shared playtime can then be introduced as a strategy to try as part of your work to address this concern. Briefly sharing with the parent some of the benefits of parent-child play can be helpful in gaining parent motivation. Practitioners can then check in as to whether the parent would like more information about this approach.

For example:

‘When families are living through challenging times, an approach that often helps children to cope better is regular parent-child playtime. This is where the parent regularly spends time – even just five minutes – playing with their child without any distractions. This shared time tells your child that they have your full attention, which helps them to feel important and supports their relationship with you. When children feel close to their parents, they are more able to cope with stress.

‘Would you like me to tell you more about it?’

Notes for the conversation guide

When working through the conversation guide with a parent/family, you are encouraged to take a collaborative approach. This involves working alongside children, parents and families to reach a shared understanding of their circumstances and concerns. Through this process, practitioners recognise that parents know their children’s strengths and vulnerabilities and can collaborate on creating plans that support children’s social and emotional wellbeing.

Collaborative practice with children occurs where practitioners view them as genuine participative partners in the decisions that affect their lives. Practitioners are encouraged to consider opportunities for children to have genuine input into their support services.

Part one: Talking with parents about their experiences of play and its benefits

This first stage acknowledges that every family has a unique history and circumstance, and the way practitioners work with each family needs to reflect their context. An understanding of the family's cultural, social and relational contexts is key to providing culturally competent service delivery that caters to children and families from diverse backgrounds.

The discussion prompts in this section will help you to unearth the parent's experiences of play as a child and what messages they came to understand about play from their own parents. Were their parents playful and encouraging of play, or is this idea something new to them? A parent's understanding of play and role in their child's play often reflects their own experiences as a child.

Practitioners are then guided to gain a picture of what play is like in the family today. Parents can share their insights into their own children's play and their role. Where appropriate, the child may also be able to talk about their experiences of play and what they enjoy about it.



This stage also provides an opportunity to learn about the benefits of play from the parent's and child's perspectives, and, where appropriate, add your own knowledge. This conversation can be significant in building motivation for parents to regularly engage in play with their child.

At completion of this conversation there is an opportunity for you to check in with parents about their readiness to work on shared playtime in their family. If a parent reports being ready, the practitioner and family may progress to part two of the conversation guide. If a parent is not ready to try play as a strategy, you are encouraged to explore challenges to play as experienced by parents and whether readiness can be increased.



At completion of part one of the conversation guide you will have:

- an understanding of the parent's experience of play as a child
- knowledge of current play experiences in the family, including the parent's involvement
- knowledge of the family's understanding of the benefits of play
- offered further information on the benefits of play as appropriate; and
- an understanding of parents' thoughts on working on shared playtime in their family.

Part two: Building parent capacity for child-led play

Many families lack skills and confidence for child-parent play. Parents can benefit from support to gain a clear understanding of child-led play. A challenge for practitioners can be normalising parents' unfamiliarity with child-led play, so that the parent doesn't feel shamed or embarrassed. It can be helpful to acknowledge that many parents feel unsure about how they should play with their children. Perhaps they did not have experiences of play with their own parents as a child, or pressures of daily life may mean that they have struggled to find the time to play with their children and have lost touch with their play skills and confidence.

To build parent capacity for shared child-led play, part two of the conversation guide supports you in a discussion with parents about the key elements of child-led play.

Parent engagement in child-led play:

- The child is free to choose the activity and how their play unfolds.
- Parents watch and listen for their child's prompts as to how they want them to join in.
- Parents aim to focus 100% of their attention on their child while they are engaging in play.
- Child-led play is not a time for adults to teach or correct their child's play. (Solter, 2013).

It can be helpful to remind parents that by following their child's lead in play their child feels that their interests and ideas are accepted and valued by their parent. This feeling contributes to a strengthened sense of self and connection to their parent, which supports positive mental health.

Practitioner modelling

In some settings it may be possible for you to engage in play with the family, allowing you to model child-led play and support the parent with their skill development. At the end of this resource there is a list of additional practitioner and family resources related to play which may be shared with the family.

Additional notes for families living with adversity

For families living with adversities such as parental physical or mental illness, domestic violence or poverty, it is necessary to acknowledge the impact of this adversity on the parent's availability to connect with their child. As children living in these circumstances are particularly vulnerable, it is important for parents to maintain their connection with their child. However, to support this careful and sensitive planning is necessary on the part of the practitioner. Alternate resources have been developed to support practitioners to work with families living with adversity to help maintain their connection with their children.

These resources are available at <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/library>



At the end of part two you will have:

- talked with the parent about the key elements of child-led play
- supported the parent to make a plan for commencing a play session with their child; and
- listened to how the parent will engage in shared child-led play with their child.

Part three: Creating opportunities for shared child-parent play

Before parents can regularly engage with their child in play, it is likely that they will benefit from support to explore and problem-solve barriers to shared playtime. This process enables parents to plan for shared playtime with their child in a way that feels more realistic and sustainable.

When supporting parents to identify barriers and supports for enabling shared playtime, you are encouraged to take a curious practice stance. When practitioners remain curious about parents' experience of parenting, they are working from a position that assumes parents know their situation best. When parents begin to see themselves as the experts in their parenting experience, they are more likely to come up with their own strategies to overcome their parenting challenges (White, 2011). Taking a curious stance often requires practitioners to 'sit' with silence and awkward moments and become confident that the parent will work out what is best for their situation.



By the end of part three you will have worked with the parent to:

- make a plan for play including when they will play, for how long and how they will remember to have the playtime
- brainstorm what might get in the way of their playtime and how they can overcome these challenges
- identify the resources and people that can help make their plan possible; and
- note how they will keep motivated towards achieving the shared playtime.

Part four: Parent reflection

Part four of the conversation guide encourages reflection on action. This approach enables the parent to reflect on their experience – how it went, what went well and what they may do differently next time – gaining new learnings from every experience. You may remind the parent that this reflective approach acknowledges that when developing new routines or skills, it is not expected that something will go perfectly the first time or every time. This conversation will hopefully allay some of the fear of judgement the parent may be feeling in relation to how their play plan goes. Your aim is to create an atmosphere where the parent can comfortably learn from their experience and try again with the new learning.

This reflection is ideally completed after a week of the parent working on their shared playtime. If the practitioner is not able to meet again with the parent, the parent can be encouraged to undertake this reflection on their own and the practitioner can check in by phone.



By the end of this stage you will have worked with the parent to reflect on:

- how they went fitting playtime into their week
- what the playtime experience was like for them
- what the playtime experience was like for their child
- how they went following their child's lead in play
- what went well
- what they might do differently next time; and
- their plan for next week.

Further resources for practitioners

Engaging Parents – An introduction course

This course is intended to support practitioners to sensitively engage with parents about their children's social and emotional wellbeing. It aims to strengthen practitioners' understanding of the factors and circumstances that impact on parents' family and social relationships and their relational capabilities.

<https://emergingminds.com.au/online-course/engaging-with-parents/>

Parent-child play: A mental health strategy for all children paper

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/parent-child-play-a-mental-health-promotion-strategy-for-all-children/>

Parent-child play: Conversation Guide

<https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/parent-child-play-conversation-guide/>

Further resources for practitioners and families

The importance of play:

Play is vital for children's mental health and wellbeing, Kidsmatter

<https://kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/blog/play-vital-childrens-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

Play helps children feel good about themselves, Kidsmatter

<http://bit.ly/2Nq7ASS>

Why play is important (0-3 months old), Raising Children Network

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/play-learning/play-ideas/why-play-is-important>

Supporting child-led play:

Stepping back from your child's play: why it's good, Raising Children Network

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/videos/stepping-back-from-play>

Delivery partners:



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