



GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS: Beginning play level

How do I play with my young child who is non-verbal? Expansion from where they are at..

It is not uncommon for parents to express uncertainty about how to go about playing with young children who are not able to express themselves. These children often have a limited repertoire of toys that they are interested in. All we need for play is to identify one toy, action (e.g. jumping), or object that the child is interested in and use it as a basis for play. We want to be aware of what the child is interested in and then for us to extend what s/he does with the toy/object to expand involvement with us and the toy/object or action.

My child is in school already, why should s/he still learn to play like this?

There is a direct link between children's ability to play with themselves and others, and their ability to learn. This also applies for children of school-going age. Children learn primarily through play. They make up action stories (e.g. the doggie runs in the yard, he runs fast, he sees daddy coming in the car, what does the doggie do? He runs to the car to greet daddy). In playing out a simple story like this, they learn about sequential actions and logical outcomes. If we can get a young child to play like this, s/he is well on the way to learning.

What toys do I use?

We need to watch carefully what toys the child spontaneously engages with. We need to observe how s/he uses the toys to develop their play skills. Allow yourself to expand play around the object of your child's interest by adding one or two ideas that you think the child might relate to. Parents can be most intuitive in knowing what a child might enjoy – and if it doesn't work, then you can try with another object/action/toy later on. *It is not how many times we have to try that is important, but where we are heading for!*

Gaining a young child's attention is often difficult and expanding that interest to include a slightly longer engagement with the toy can be quite difficult at first. Remember this is an activity that you and your child should enjoy together. Don't allow a play session to change into a "teaching session". **The idea is to have fun together.** *Play, communication and learning can only happen when a child is interested and enjoy what they are doing with you.*

So how do I do this?

1. Where do I start? *More observation, less talking and directing:* This is not about what you, the parent wants to play with, but *what your child would like to play with.* We can suggest certain activities, but we need to ensure that the child is in the lead here. We often times tend to be too directive in playing with our children. Rather, watch what they do and then, let's move from there.
2. What does your child do with the toys spontaneously? Does s/he hold the toy, throw the toy, put the toy in a box with other toys? These are important first indicators of where you can start to play with your child.
3. How do I use these observations to play with my child?
 - Start where your child is at , e.g. If your child is holding his/her toy, that is where you start.
 - Slowly try and expand what they are doing by introducing some other ideas
 - Look, see how your child responds. If s/he loses interest, you need to try something else. Know that everything you try is positive as you get to know understand your child's interests better.

Please see the example of a play interaction on the next page.....

Example

My child only tends to hold his teddy/car/doll, how do I get him/her to play with me?

One idea:

Parent: I see you like to hold teddy? Can I hold him a bit?

Child: (gives it to you)

Parent: Teddy is a good friend. Look! Teddy is waving at you?

Child: (wants Teddy back).

Parent: You like to hold Teddy! He is your friend. Do you think Teddy wants to play with something?

Child: (ignores utterance)...(parent puts some other toys closer – and takes the car)

Parent: (Takes the car): Hallo, Teddy, do you want a ride ? Come sit with me in the car....(Parent helps the child to place teddy on the car) go!, See we are going fast/slow!

Child: Takes teddy and the car and imitate the action of “go”

A short sequence of play like this, can be a major step forward for a child with severe communication difficulties. Do not under-estimate the power of these short, but meaningful interactions.

What should I look out for?

1. You want your child to be interested, to pay attention to you and to engage with the toys. The *quality of the attention* and *how* they play with the toys is what we want to promote.
2. When you introduce new ideas, you have to do so slowly while watching your child’s reaction. If they lose interest and walk away – that’s ok. That is where you start. Next time, new toy, new play situation.
3. It is not about how long you play together, but the quality of the joint attention that is important.
4. What we are looking for is for your child to be interested, busy with the toys, engaged for a short while. Then we can gradually try and extend this time.

Most important: Have fun!