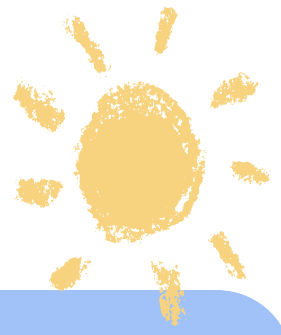


A Way of Being with Children

Practical Tools for Connection, Safety, and HOPE in Early Childhood



PLAY IS HEALING

Building Connection, Confidence, and Resilience Through Play

Play is how children explore their world, learn new things, and make sense of their experiences. Before they can explain feelings with words, play becomes their language - expressing joy, curiosity, fears, and needs. Through movement and pretend play, children communicate what they are working through. When adults join play with openness and curiosity, children feel seen, heard, supported, and empowered. Play also supports brain development, emotional regulation, and resilience, giving children a safe space to practice skills and build confidence within a trusted relationship.

Play Builds Safety and Connection

When adults engage in play with warmth and presence, children receive an important message: “You matter. I see you. You are important.”

Play strengthens relationships by:

- Building trust and emotional safety
- Supporting self-expression
- Reducing stress and tension
- Encouraging creativity and problem-solving

For children who have experienced adversity or trauma, play can be especially healing. It allows children to regain a sense of control, express emotions safely, and experience connection without pressure. These moments help children feel accepted just as they are and strengthen their sense of belonging. Over time, this sense of safety makes it easier for children to explore, take risks, and share their inner world with others.



Skills & Practice:

1. Let the Child Lead. Allow the child to choose the game, toy, or activity. Resist the urge to correct or direct. Follow their ideas, with curiosity and enthusiasm, even if they don't make sense to you.

2. Be Curious, Not Controlling. Observe what the child is doing and reflect it back. Notice: “You’re building a really tall tower” or “Your dinosaur is very strong.” Avoid teaching, testing, or quizzing during play.

3. Use Play as a Window. Notice themes, emotions, or repeated actions. Play can reveal worries or experiences children may not yet have words for. You don't need to analyze - simply notice and stay present.

4. Join With Warmth and Acceptance. Use a gentle voice and relaxed body language. Match the child's energy when appropriate. Let play feel natural and enjoyable rather than “productive.”

5. Support Co-Regulation Through Play. Play can help calm the nervous system. Slow, rhythmic activities (drawing, building, pretend tea parties) can soothe. Active play (movement, games, laughter) can release excess energy and/or stored stress.

A Way of Being Reminder

Play is not a break from learning - it is learning. When adults approach play with curiosity, acceptance, and presence, they create healing moments that support children's emotional well-being and lifelong growth.

Reconnect During Tough Moments

If a child is struggling, play can help rebuild connection. A playful moment, shared laughter, or gentle engagement can reduce stress and open the door to regulation. Connection is crucial to regulation for children, and play helps to bridge that gap.

Everyday Tips for Play That Heals

Short Playtime Still Matters

Daily playtime, even 10 minutes, strengthens bonds. What matters most is quality, not quantity. A few minutes of fully present play can help children feel deeply connected.

There Is No "Wrong Way" to Play

Avoid judgment or correction as long as the child is safe. Let play unfold naturally. Creativity and imagination grow when children feel free from evaluation.

Follow Feelings, Not Just Actions

Notice emotions during play:

- Excitement
- Frustration
- Fear
- Pride

You might reflect:

- "That felt really exciting."
- "That part was difficult and frustrating."
- "You kept trying even when that was tough."
- "You're so proud that you finished that puzzle!"

Stay Curious About Repetition

Repeated play themes often reflect a child's inner world. Children may replay experiences to understand them or to feel a sense of mastery. Your calm presence makes this process safer and more effective.

Use Play to Strengthen Resilience

Play helps children practice:

- Problem-solving
- Flexibility
- Emotional expression
- Recovery after mistakes

When children feel supported in play, they learn they can try, fail, and try again - a key component of resilience.

A Gentle Reminder for Parents

You don't need to be perfect, creative, or have all the answers. Showing up with warmth and attention is enough. Even on hard days, your presence in play sends a powerful message: **you matter, and I'm here with you.**



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