

How To Stay In The Play With Little Ones

Lynne Kenney, PsyD

Interactive activities with children shift and change, come front of mind and move on. That's one of the greatest aspects of working with families, we attend to what they need, in the moment. Sometimes it is brain-based skills, other times it is enhancing executive function. **Today is play.**

Recently two parents who read [The Family Coach Method](#) asked me, "How do I use the space between to stay in the play?" Bright questions, from two caring families.

As I tell families, the space between you and your child is the area between the two of you where you communicate, build skills and enhance your relationships. It is as though there were a hoola-hoop between you delineating a space of growth and change.

It is within this space, face to face, on the floor, at a kitchen counter or at the park where you offer your child new words and actions for better decision-making, social skills and feelings management.

Staying in the play shows creativity how to flourish

When you sit on the floor and play with your child, the space between you is the area in which play themes are explored, imagination thrives and creativity expands. Whether you are building with Legos, drawing or playing pretend, "staying in the play" is the gift you give your child.

What does it mean to stay in the play?

Staying in the play means engaging in child-lead play without shifting to reality-based questions or communication. Staying in the play means moving with the child-lead themes, expanding them and allowing your child to flourish in play.

Let us consider Mommy Jessica and Jameson (age 4). Today they are playing at the Thomas The Train table in their living room. It is full of trains, train tracks and colorful objects of play. The play theme the child has introduced is going to the store.

Jameson: "Thomas is going to the store, Mommy."

Jessica: "How are we going to get there?"

Jameson: "Here you take Arthur, he's coming too."

Jessica: "Here is Arthur, he's going to the store with Thomas."

Jameson: "No, not that way this way," as Jameson moves his train along the train track.

Jessica: "Oh, I see we're going this way." "Arthur is so excited to go to the store."

Jameson: "We're getting apples for lunch mommy."

Staying in the play is moving with the theme, introducing words that enhance the theme and being in the play.

Jessica: "Oh, Arthur loves apples."

Jameson: "I love apples with almond butter."

Jessica: "Yum, me too." "We can get Thomas apples and almond butter."

Moving away from the play would be if Jessica brought reality into the play, thus stopping the creative flow. It might sound like this:

Jessica: "It's not apple season, we have no apples."

Or

Jessica: "But you are allergic to apples, we cannot get those."

When we stay in the play, what is creative and imagined, is the joy. We need not talk about the future, we need not discuss allergies, we just stay with the theme and allow the child to explore and discover.

Here's another example.

Daddy Martin and Sarah (age 5) are playing "My Little Ponies." One of the ponies has gotten aggressive and is hitting another pony.

Sarah: "My little pony is named Lizzy."

Martin: "I see Lizzy the pony."

Sarah: "The big pony is smashing the little pony."

Martin: "Oh that must hurt."

Sarah: "It does."

Martin: "How can we help?"

Sarah: "Let's throw the big pony away."

Martin: "Maybe we can show the big pony how to be gentle."

Sarah: "How?"

Martin: "Big pony we like to play. But when you hurt the little pony, it's not fun to play with you."

Sarah: "That's right, we don't like you."

Martin: "We can all like each other if we play with gentle hooves. Maybe we can dig in the pony garden. Let's do it with kind bodies."

Sarah: "Yes, we can like you then."

Martin did a lovely job as a dad, staying with his daughter's theme by offering the HOW ~ How can we all play nicely and the WHAT ~ What do we need to do with our bodies to be nice?

Stepping out of the play could have sounded like this:

Martin: "These toys are expensive, if you do not use them properly you will get a time-out."

Or

Martin: "You are not playing nicely, just like when you are at school."

In this case, the daddy stayed with the play and provided an opportunity for Sarah to learn:

1. How to collaborate together to help teach the pony to be kind.
2. That when we make mistakes, we can learn new words and behaviors to get along better with others.
3. That the space between is an area, where we can explore themes without getting in trouble.
4. Play is where we learn new skills, new thoughts, words and actions.
5. In play we can pretend.

Martin is so skillful, he might later introduce that sometimes the big pony hurts the little pony because he has hurting feelings himself. Then at play, he could explore with his daughter what underlies the pony's misbehavior, possibly impacting Sarah's own ability to develop skills that will lead to more successful social interactions at home and at school.

When parents learn to stay in the play, the play experience is more enjoyable and fruitful for all. Simply be present, stay with the theme and when you are not sure what to say or do next, be quiet and wait for the next verbal prompt from your child. Children know how to play. They will lead the way.

To learn more about play, feelings and interaction with your little ones, here are a few resources:

[Kidlutions](#)

[Moving Smart](#)

[Teach Preschool](#)

[Kimoichis](#)

[Brain Insights](#)

[Sue Atkins](#)

As I like to say, "We move to learn, we play to behave." Let us know about your play experience www.lynnkenney.com or twitter [@drlynnkenney](https://twitter.com/drlynnkenney). Wishing you all peace, joy and creative play today.

Lynne Kenney, Psy.D., is a mother of two, a practicing pediatric psychologist in Scottsdale, AZ, and the author of *The Family Coach Method*. She has advanced fellowship training in forensic psychology and developmental pediatric psychology from Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School and Harbor-UCLA/UCLA Medical School. Dr. Kenney speaks nationally about enhancing executive function, social and academic skills with motor movement. Her NEW book with Wendy Young **Bloom: Helping Children Blossom** is revolutionizing classrooms and homes worldwide www.lynnkenney.com.