Playtime Skills for Parents and Caregivers

By Kathy Eugster, MA

Children require many hundreds, if not thousands, of **positive face-to-face interactions** with their parents or caregivers on a regular and consistent basis for healthy development and for the creation of a positive and strong relationship between parent or caregiver and child. Child development experts have found that parent-child or caregiver-child **play activities** are an excellent way to provide these interactions and to meet many of the essential needs of children.

In this article I would like to highlight some key **parental skills** for playing and connecting with children.

To simplify things, in many instances I use the word "parent" to stand for **any caring adult who has a relationship with a particular child.** This would include adoptive parents, foster parents, step-parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, other extended family members, or any other caregiver a child has such as a childcare worker or nanny. The skills outlined below work for any adult who wants to facilitate a playful and positive relationship with a child.

What is Parent-Child or Caregiver-Child Play?

This type of play happens when a parent or caregiver and child engage in a play activity **interactively and face-to-face** where positive feelings are generated. It is a different kind of play than child-child play and children's solitary independent play. It also offers unique benefits over other types of play because parents and caregivers are more mature play partners and have many years of acquired knowledge and life experience.

Styles of Parent-Child or Caregiver-Child Play

There are two main styles of parent-child or caregiver-child play. One I have called **Child-Directed Playtime** and the other I have called **Parent-Directed Playtime.** I believe it is important to understand the difference between these two different styles of play. So to simplify things, I outline a basic framework for playtime that can be used for any play activity and is based on **parental roles** and **parental skills.**

The Basic Framework for Playtime

I identify **two separate roles** that parents or caregivers can take on in playtime, **directive or nondirective.** In a directive role, which is the overarching parental role for Parent-Directed Playtime, parents will lead, structure, guide, and direct certain aspects of the playtime. In a nondirective role, which is the overarching parental role for Child-Directed Playtime, parents will let their children direct the play activities and will follow their child's directions as long as the play remains safe and non-destructive.

To support parents and caregivers in getting into a particular role during playtime, either directive or nondirective, I identify a number of **parental skills** that parents or caregivers use. Let's now have a closer look at these skills.

Parental Playtime Skills

I have broken down these skills into several categories as follows:

- **Empathic Skills** (will support a **nondirective** parental role)
  - Describing Skill
  - Feelings Identification Skill
  - Paraphrasing Skill
  - Encouragement Skill
- **Autonomy Skills** (will support a **nondirective** parental role)
  - Independence Skill
  - Following Directions Skill
- **Play Structuring Skills** (will support a **directive** parental role)
  - Engagement Skill
  - Regulating Skill
- **Limit-Setting Skill** (will support a **directive** parental role)

Empathic Skills

These four skills are very important because they "connect" parents or caregivers and children, strengthening their relationships and bringing them together in many different ways. The objective for using the Empathic Skills is to notice and **objectively acknowledge** your child's actions, feelings, words, and strengths so that your child feels **understood and accepted.**

When children experience understanding and acceptance, they feel safe and are able to explore their worlds and develop their creativity, imagination, and problem-solving abilities. In addition, this acceptance and acknowledgment from parents or caregivers is extremely important in helping a child develop a positive sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

Empathic Skill #1: Describing Skill

The objective of the Describing Skill is to watch your child and **describe your child's actions and play activities** out loud using neutral, objective, non-judgemental statements. These are called Describing Statements. Examples:

- Child puts princess into a car; parent says, "You're putting her into the car now."
- Child scribbles on paper; parent says, "You drew some blue lines there."
- Child is looking for a particular block; parent says, "You're looking for another block."
- Child puts a dragon in the castle; parent says, "Now the dragon is in the castle."

Empathic Skill #2: Feelings Identification Skill

The objective of the Feelings Identification Skill is to watch your child's face and body language, and when you notice a feeling coming up in your child, or a feeling being expressed through the toys, think to yourself and **identify the feeling or emotion** that your child is experiencing or expressing without asking your child a question. Then make a non-judgemental statement out loud to your child that identifies that specific feeling. This is called a Feelings Identification Statement. Examples:

- Child is looking puzzled at a toy; parent says, "Looks like you're feeling confused."
- Child is startled when a toy falls on the floor; parent says, "That surprised you!"
- Child aggressively bangs together two dinosaurs; parent says, "Those dinosaurs seem really angry with each other."
- Child is sitting on the floor and aimlessly moving a car around; parent says, "It seems like you're feeling bored."

Empathic Skill #3: Paraphrasing Skill

If your child is telling you about something that is going on in the playtime or about something that has happened outside of the playtime, respond to your child with neutral and reflective statements by **paraphrasing** what your child has said to you.

Paraphrasing is basically capturing the content and meaning of what your child says by saying it out loud using slightly different words than your child used. Paraphrasing is not parroting! Parroting is saying something back that copies word-for-word what your child says.

Empathic Skill #4: Encouragement Skill

When you notice your child is working or has worked hard on a task, instead of praising your child, **encourage and empower** your child by using Encouraging Statements, which are basically Describing Statements or Feelings Identification Statements that focus on and acknowledge your child's feelings, strengths, or efforts in doing something. Examples:

- "You're feeling happy with how that turned out."
- "I can see you're working really hard on that."
- "You're determined to get that."
- "Sounds like you know how to count."

Autonomy Skills

The objective of using the Autonomy Skills is to allow your child to take control and to **lead and direct the play activity.** These nondirective role skills provide your child with a sense of autonomy and are very important for the development of your child's independence and self-identity. Although most of the time a child's life is highly controlled, with the Autonomy Skills children are given the opportunity to experience some sense of control.

However, please keep in mind that if your child is suggesting or engaging in unsafe or destructive behavior, you would not use these skills. Instead, you would use the Limit-Setting Skill to prevent or stop the inappropriate behavior.

Autonomy Skill #1: Independence Skill

The objective of using the Independence Skill is to give your child opportunities to take responsibility for **making their own choices and decisions** without being directed by you. With this skill, you are giving your child the freedom to explore and to decide on their own what to do and how to do it.

When using the Independence Skill, you will **refrain from:**

- Telling or suggesting to your child what to do or not do
- Advising, coaching, teaching, or correcting your child
- Asking questions to your child
- Making judgements or expressing approval or disapproval
- Directing your child in any manner

Autonomy Skill #2: Following Directions Skill

Use the Following Directions Skill when your child asks you to join with them in play, for example, by asking you to do a task such as drawing a house, inviting you to engage in imaginary play together, or requesting to play a game together. You would respond by **following your child's directions** and by doing what you think your child would like you to do.

Play Structuring Skills

The objective of using these two directive role skills is to **provide structure and direction** to help your child develop and learn by challenging, guiding, and supporting your child in the exploration and mastery of new skills through fun play activities that will encourage them to learn and develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills.

Play Structuring Skill #1: The Engagement Skill

The objective of the Engagement Skill is to **stimulate and maintain** your child's interactive engagement with you in play by getting your child's attention and initiating and maintaining a connection by interacting with your child in a fun and playful manner. Parents and caregivers may want to increase their emotional intensity.

Examples of using the Engagement Skill would include imitating what your child is doing, initiating a specific play activity, or suggesting an imaginary play scenario by providing ideas and props or taking on the role of a play character.

Play Structuring Skill #2: The Regulating Skill

The objective of the Regulating Skill is to **encourage regulated play** by calming and regulating your child's nervous system as needed during playtime. During playtime, you can provide a more calming, soothing, and nurturing environment in order to regulate your child's emotional intensity and nervous system by directing or redirecting your child to a more regulating activity, for example activities that are rhythmic, sensorimotor, and expressive.

With this skill, it is important for parents to regulate their own nervous systems to "co-regulate" their children's nervous systems and also to use calming parent behaviors such as using a quieter voice and slower movements.

Limit-Setting Skill

If your child intends to do, or is actually doing, something unsafe or destructive, use the Limit-Setting Skill to prevent or **stop the inappropriate behavior.** It is the parent's responsibility to ensure that the environment stays safe. During play activities, limits for your child are generally set to prevent hurting oneself or others and for not damaging or breaking things.

The method outlined here has three steps to it and focuses on teaching your child to make the right choices:

- **Step 1: Setting the Limit:** Communicate the limit or rule to your child, identifying inappropriate and/or appropriate behaviors. Step 1 can be repeated several times. Supplemental parts to Step 1 include:
    - Acknowledging your child's feelings
    - Redirecting your child to a more appropriate behavior, including giving choices to your child
- **Step 2: Providing a Warning of a Consequence:** Give your child a warning of a specific consequence (such as the removal of a toy, ending a specific activity, or ending playtime altogether) that will happen the next time the limit or rule is broken and your child engages in the inappropriate behavior again. Step 2 is not repeated.
- **Step 3: Enforcing the Consequence:** If the inappropriate behavior happens again after the warning has been given in Step 2, you will enforce the consequence immediately.

Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime

The overarching role that parents and caregivers take on in **Child-Directed Playtime** is a **nondirective role** using the Autonomy (Independence and Following Directions) Skills and Empathic (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, and Encouragement) Skills and **switching temporarily to a directive role** as necessary to use the Limit-Setting Skill, then returning to a nondirective role.

- Use the **Independence Skill** and allow your child to lead and direct the playtime; don't tell your child what to do or not do.
- Wait for your child to initiate an invitation for you to join in play and then use the **Following Directions Skill.**
- Describe your child's actions using the **Describing Skill.**
- When you notice a feeling that is coming up for your child either directly or through the toys, identify the feeling you notice using the **Feelings Identification Skill.**
- When your child is telling you about something, use the **Paraphrasing Skill.**
- When you notice your child is working, or has worked, hard on something, use the **Encouragement Skill.**

- When your child engages in, or starts to engage in unsafe or destructive behaviors, switch temporarily to a directive role and use the **Limit-Setting Skill** to limit the behaviors, then return to a nondirective role using the above skills.

Guidelines for Parent-Directed Playtime

The overarching role that parents and caregivers take on in **Parent-Directed Playtime** is a **directive role** using the Play Structuring (Engagement and Regulating) Skills and Limit-Setting Skill. Parents will also **switch briefly into a nondirective role** at times by interspersing the Empathic (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, Encouragement) Skills throughout the playtime in order to support a strong and connected relationship.

- Use the **Engagement Skill** to engage your child and keep them engaged in interactive play.
- When your child starts to become physically or emotionally over-aroused, use the **Regulating Skill.**
- When your child engages in, or starts to engage in unsafe or destructive behaviors, use the **Limit-Setting Skill** to limit the behaviors.
- Describe your child's actions using the **Describing Skill.**
- When you notice a feeling that is coming up for your child either directly or through the toys, identify the feeling you notice using the **Feelings Identification Skill.**
- When your child is telling you about something, use the **Paraphrasing Skill.**
- When you notice your child is working, or has worked, hard on something, use the **Encouragement Skill.**

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About the Author

Kathy Eugster (MA, Counselling Psychology) worked in counselling and therapy for over twenty years as a Registered Clinical Counsellor with the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors; Certified Play Therapist-Supervisor with the Canadian Association for Play Therapy; and child and family therapist with family service agencies and in private practice. In 2013, she won the Monica Herbert Award from the Canadian Association for Play Therapy for outstanding contributions and dedication to child psychotherapy and play therapy in Canada. She is now retired from clinical practice but continues to support parents and caregivers with books and articles on parent-child play through her website, **Pacific Spirit Play Resources**. Kathy lives in Vancouver, Canada.

If you are interested in learning more about parent-child or caregiver-child play, please access Kathy's website **Pacific Spirit Play Resources, https://www.pacificspiritplay.com/** where Kathy has over 30 Blog articles for parents or caregivers on a wide variety of topics all focused on connecting and strengthening relationships with children. You may want to subscribe to Kathy's email list to be the first to know when new Blogs are posted, usually every month. In addition, Kathy's book, ***Play Skills for Parents: Connecting with Your Child Through Play***, which describes in more detail the play skills for parents and caregivers outlined above for children between three and ten years old, is available on the website.