

SUMMARY



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Playful Learning & Joyful Parenting

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This is a summary of a full white paper on Joyful Parenting and Playful Learning. Please read the full report for more comprehensive detail on how parents engage their child in playful learning, and how programmes can empower parents to bring joy and learning into daily interactions with their child.

Introduction



Parents* are the most important people in a child's life

In the race to make sure their child succeeds in the 21st century, parents are missing a key piece of what makes parenting so powerful – *joy*.

It is time to bring joy to parenting, for the sake of both parents and children.

This research explores the latest and best science on playful parenting. It encourages small changes in a parent's everyday moments and interactions that enrich the experience of being a parent while helping every child reach their full potential.

Hurried child, hurried parent.

Parents are often paralysed by an exhaustive list of tasks and structured activities that they feel they *must* provide if they want their child to succeed. It has created what's known as the 'hurried child' syndrome: children who are constantly busy striving to achieve and reach pre-set targets but who have little time to experience the joy of childhood.

Behind every 'hurried child' is a hurried parent, desperately trying to ensure that their children keep up with others in this race to succeed.

The COVID-19 pandemic only reinforced these trends. Parents felt more isolated. Learning was remote and parents became the formal teachers needed to ensure that their child didn't miss out. As we move into the post COVID era, parents are stressed and

overwhelmed.

Inspiring more joyful parenting

Current research suggests that both parents and children benefit from something that may seem mundane on the surface – *play*.

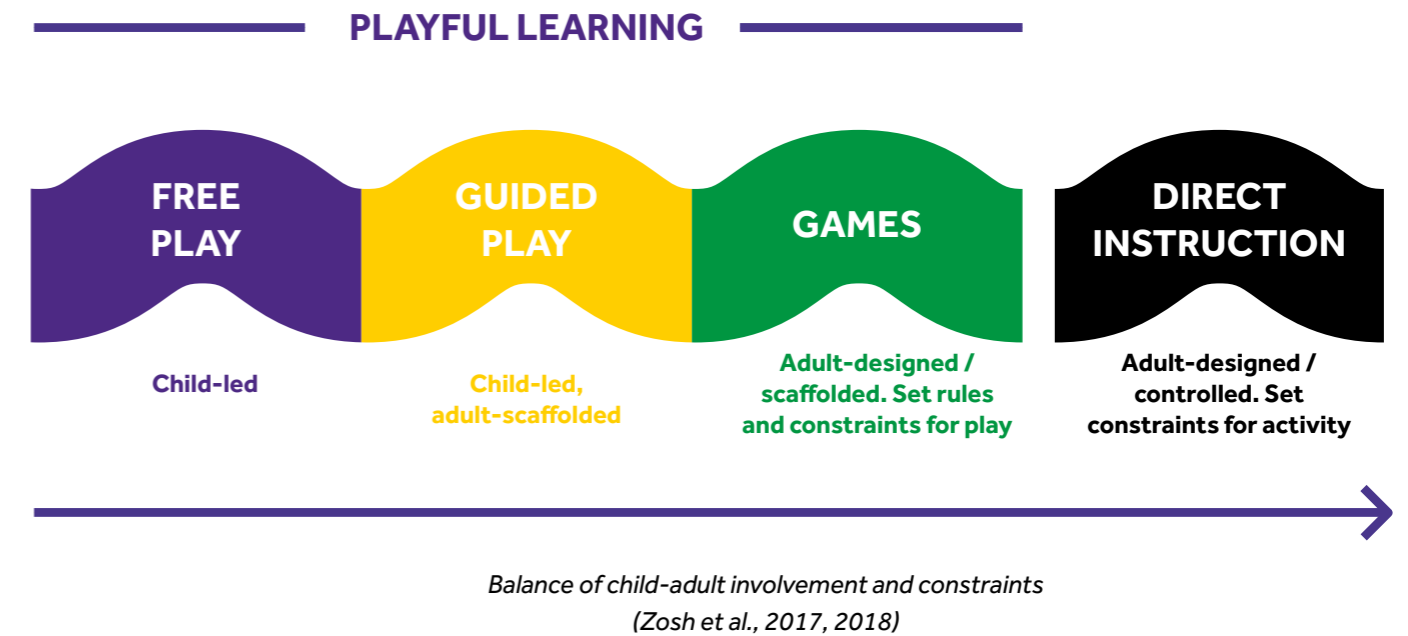
Parents can enrich and populate everyday moments in ways that support playful learning and, in turn, foster joyful parenting and happy, social, thinking children without going to multiple activities or creating structured learning lessons.

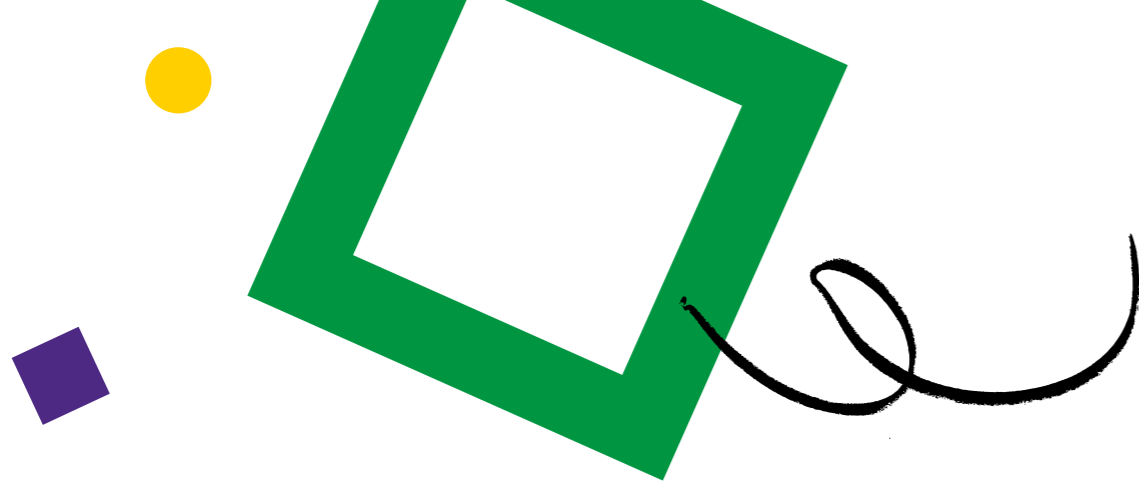


* We define parent as any family member, caregiver, or guardian who plays a lead role in caring for a child.

The Spectrum of Play

Play is historically hard to define. However, play is best conceptualised across a spectrum reflecting varying degrees of child and adult involvement in the experience, including choice and structure and the presence of a learning goal.

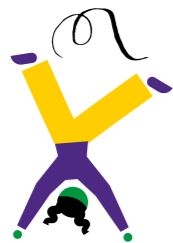




Guided play

Parents choose an activity. They also plan and maintain the environment and give their child gentle support. However, the child leads the play experience. Research finds guided play to be the sweet spot on the spectrum for achieving a learning goal.

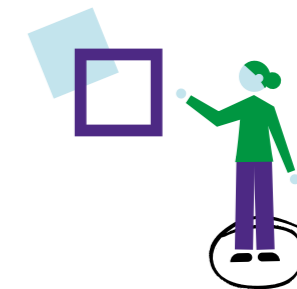
Example: A parent asks whether a child can build a tall tower. The child uses building blocks to meet the challenge and when she runs out of blocks, the parent subtly asks, 'Can you think of any way to make it taller?'



Free play

This is when children have the time and space to choose how they play. They start and direct their own play according to what interests them. Parents can be present to observe and step in when needed for safety, but this is not always necessary especially with older children.

Example: Children go on their own 'adventure' to find treasure in the park or build a pillow fort in their bedroom.



Direct instruction

This is when a child is told what to do or how to solve a problem. It does not fall under the umbrella of playful learning since it is largely adult-controlled, although – when it's made meaningful for children and includes concrete examples – it can help children learn new and complex concepts.

Example: When learning to tie their shoelaces, a child may struggle to discover the right technique through play and experimenting. If a parent models how to do it, they can benefit from this direct instruction.



Games

Games include physical games, board games and card games, as well as digital games. The game maker already designed the features of the game, but there are many ways for children to play within the game and to take charge of the activity.

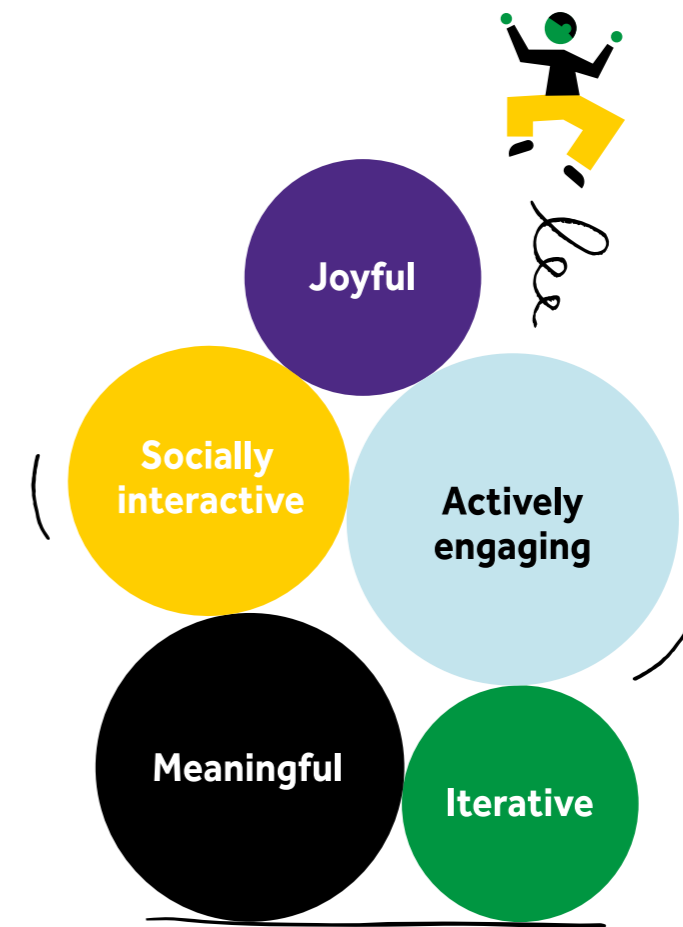
Example: Tag is a physical game which has set rules but within the rules, there are elements of choice and creativity. For example, children negotiate as they decide who will tag or be tagged or make their own unique rules within the traditional game. The tagger must think on their toes as they choose to tag people in a different order. Children can strategise ways to avoid getting tagged, like suddenly changing direction or hiding behind a tree.



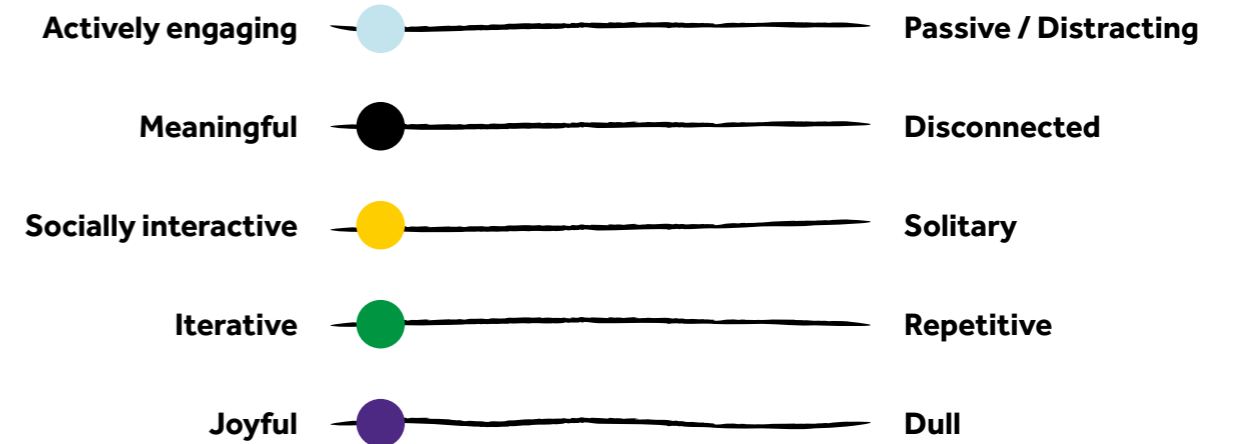
The Five Characteristics of Learning Through Play

The science of learning shows that play is actively engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative and joyful... the very characteristics that best help children to learn.

- **actively engaging** (not passive or distracting) – hands-on and ‘minds-on’ learning
- **meaningful** (not disconnected) – learning in a way that matters to the child’s life and culture
- **socially interactive** (not solitary) – learning with other people
- **iterative** (not repetitive) – questioning, trying things out as they change, experimenting and problem solving
- **joyful** (not dull) – fun mixed with a sense of achievement



(Zosh et al., 2017, 2018)



Fifteen Approaches to Bring the Characteristics to Life

Research suggests fifteen approaches every parent can take to support their child's playful learning in their daily life.

The following approaches promote the characteristics of playful learning.

Actively Engaging



1. Support their autonomy

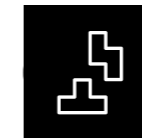


2. Help them get to the next step



3. Create a supportive environment

Meaningful



4. Build on their interests



5. Let them join daily tasks



6. Build on existing knowledge

Socially Interactive



7. Be a collaborative partner



8. Engage in two-way conversation



9. Share activities that promote social interaction

Iterative



10. Embrace ambiguity and uncertainty



11. Encourage persistence



12. Praise the process

Joyful



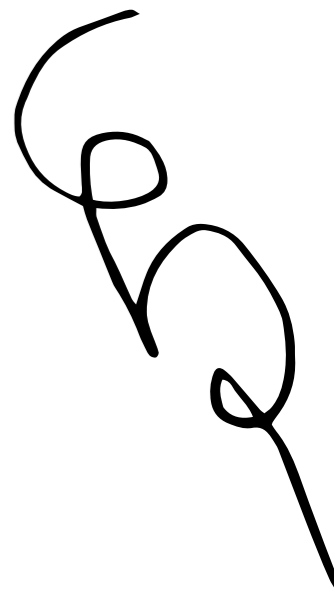
13. Share positive emotions



14. Find the fun



15. Share interests and leisure activities



Actively Engaging

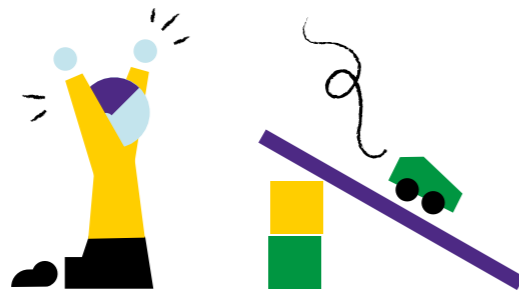
Children learn better when they are immersed in the learning process, rather than acting as receptacles for information.



1. Support their autonomy

Support your child by giving them choice in what they do and let them discover things for themselves. Research shows that this can also reduce parental stress.

Tip: Follow your child's pace when they are engaged in a task. If they get stuck, ask open-ended questions (for example, ask 'What else could you try?') to encourage them to find solutions themselves, rather than showing them what to do.



Imagine a child who is building a ramp to make his toy car go faster. His father sits nearby, folding laundry. When the child struggles and calls to his dad for help, his dad asks him questions to elicit his thinking (e.g., 'What have you tried so far? Did that work? Why not?'). After a short back-and-forth discussion, the boy returns to work on his ramp independently. Now imagine if the boy's fa-

ther stepped in before his son asked for help and instructed him to put more blocks on his ramp tower to increase the ramp's slope. In the first scenario, the father supports his son's autonomy by letting his son maintain control over the activity (even when the son asks for help) while, in the second scenario, he takes the son's autonomy away by controlling the experience.



2. Help them get to the next step

Your child may need a little help when learning a new skill or concept. You can help them build a bridge between what they already know and new knowledge. If you observe them and then set the parameters of an activity to be just slightly above what your child can already do, and provide support when needed during the task, they can be engaged and motivated while also being challenged to learn new things.

Tip: Support your child by asking him or her questions (for example, 'What happened when you tried ___?'), thinking aloud (for example, 'Hmm, well we already know __, so we could try ___.') or drawing your child's attention to certain features of the task at hand (for example, 'Notice __. How does that compare to ___?'). This type of support can also be accomplished through the environment, by presenting the child with progressively more difficult tasks once they have mastered the easier one.



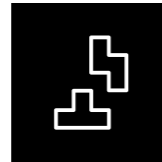
3. Create a supportive environment

Children are no different from adults. They need the right environment in which to learn. So, prep and prepare the physical environment so that your child can achieve learning goals. Provide access to open-ended toys and materials to inspire creativity and engagement.

Tip: Just like a chef preps his food before cooking, prep your child's room or space before they start playing. Prioritise quality over quantity when thinking about what toys and materials to provide. Access to toys and materials that are open-ended (meaning your child can use them in different ways), matters more than the number of toys they have access to.

Meaningful

Learning needs to be more than just information recall. If it's relevant and adds purpose, children will retain what they learn.



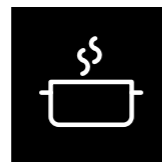
4. Build on their interests

Base playful learning on what your children find interesting. Give your children the space, time, and materials needed to explore their interests and take care to avoid overemphasising structured or competitive activities related to their interest.

Tip: Support your child's interest development by providing relevant materials, encouraging related projects and activities, and taking them to virtual or in-person events connected to their interests. Help them draw connections between different experiences.

Imagine a father and his 4-year-old daughter baking cookies from their family recipe. There is much meaningful learning to happen for his daughter in this seemingly normal task! The father helps his daughter develop concepts of print when he demonstrates how he reads the recipe from left to right to find out what ingredients they need. He supports her autonomy and confidence when he invites her to try different styles of chocolate chips and choose which ones she would like to use.

Then, he supports her understanding of one-to-one correspondence when they count as they scoop cups of chocolate chips one-by-one into the mixing bowl. She develops her executive function skills as she learns how to follow the steps of a complex sequence and control her urge to put 'just one more' scoop of chocolate chips in the bowl! Throughout the experience, she is learning how she can contribute to a special family tradition.



5. Let them join daily tasks

It's often quicker and easier to do the household tasks on your own. However, involving your child in your daily tasks helps give children opportunities to pick up skills uniquely meaningful to your household and culture in a playful and purposeful way.

Tip: Involve your child in routines like cooking, cleaning, shopping, sorting mail, and taking out the rubbish. Slow down and narrate your actions and invite your child to help you in a way that both meets their ability, gives choice, and builds a sense of purpose.



6. Build on existing knowledge

Draw on existing knowledge and compare past experiences to new ones to help your child learn.

If children see the connections between new experiences and what they already know, they are more likely to understand and remember new knowledge.

Tip: Help your child make connections between what they already know and something new by asking your child questions to guide them to make these connections for themselves (for example, 'What does this remind you of?'), by modelling making these connections yourself (for example, 'This reminds me of when we...'), and by using comparisons between what they already understand and new information (for example, 'This is a lot like ___ because ___').

Socially Interactive

Children and adults both process information better when it's learned through social interaction. Learning alongside others improves understanding and helps develop skills like communication, collaboration, and critical thinking .

Talking *with* children and sharing activities with them help promote the positive social interaction that is key to playful learning.*



7. Be a collaborative partner

Work together with your child to set goals and find solutions. Suggest ideas and things to think about rather than telling them what to do. When parents collaborate with their child, they model how to be curious and creative explorers.

Tip: To promote learning without giving the answer, use prompting phrases and questions that start with 'I wonder...', 'What if...?', 'What do you think about...?', 'When ___ happened, it made me think about___.'



8. Engage in two-way conversation

Children learn so much more if you talk *with* them, rather than talk *at* them. Open-ended questions that are based on a child's own thinking rather than those that just test knowledge, are more likely to benefit children.

Tip: Take conversational turns with your child. Ask your child questions that spark meaningful back-and-forth conversation, rather than simple yes-or-no questions.

* Note: The fifteen approaches relate to how parents can support the five characteristics of learning through play in their own interactions with their child, so it does not address how parents can nurture social interaction between their child and other children. But being a playful parent doesn't always have to mean that you are the one playing with your child. As a parent, you can also foster learning through play by creating space and opportunities for your child to interact and play with other children.



Imagine a mother and daughter walking to the supermarket through the park. The daughter has recently been learning about shadows at school. As they walk, the mother models curiosity as she moves her body in different ways to experiment with her shadow. She asks her daughter what she notices. Then, rather than point out other shadows to her daughter, she says, 'We can see both of our shadows today! Hmm... I wonder what else has a shadow,' and they engage in a rich

back-and-forth discussion as they 'hunt' for other shadows, and compare them (e.g., 'Why is that tree's shadow bigger than the other tree's shadow?'), along their walk. The following week they walk through the park again, but on a cloudy day. The mother acts surprised and asks her daughter, 'Where did our shadows go?' These open-ended questions are the springboard for engaging two-way conversation.



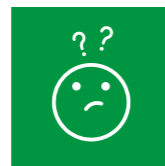
9. Share activities that promote social interaction

Activities like blocks, games, and puzzles promote positive social interaction, including two-way conversation, while also giving the context for you to support your child's learning.

Tip: Traditional toys, like blocks, inspire more meaningful talk between parents and their child than electronic toys do. This certainly does not mean you should avoid electronic toys altogether, just be sure to make time for traditional toys, too. Take care not to let the toys reduce chances for positive interaction between you and your child. Interaction with a responsive electronic toy is not a substitute for positive interaction with a responsive human.

Iterative

Young brains are designed to explore and build on what they already know. This means that children naturally experiment to find solutions: they build on what they know, test and try out different things, and explore new questions as they get closer to an answer. This process both requires and develops creativity and problem-solving behaviours.



10. Embrace ambiguity and uncertainty

It's OK not to know everything. In fact, it can be helpful. It means your child is more likely to ignite a sense of curiosity and be motivated to look for their own solutions.

Tip: Be patient when your child makes mistakes. Encourage them to continue testing and trying out their ideas and model question-asking and reflection as appropriate responses to uncertainty.



11. Encourage persistence

Learning to be persistent and to persevere with tasks are important skills for any child to learn. And children are more persistent when they are free or gently guided in their attempts than when an adult takes control.

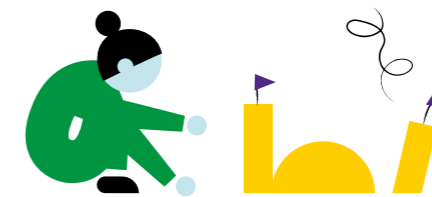
Tip: When your child is struggling with a task, avoid giving them the solution right away. Rather, reassure them that new things are hard at first, but they get easier with practice. Support them by encouraging them to think about why what they've tried so far hasn't worked and to keep trying different solutions using what they know.



12. Praise the process

Praise children for their hard work and persistence rather than simply focusing on outcomes and results.

Tip: Praise your child's effort (for example, say, 'I noticed that you tried to put that piece on top of this one. That was a great try!'), rather than compliment fixed traits (such as saying, 'You're so smart!') or giving general positive feedback (by saying, 'Yay! Good job!').



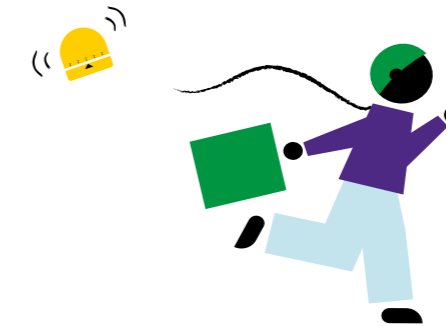
Imagine a child trying to build a sandcastle at the beach. She gets frustrated when the waves keep knocking her castle down. 'This is too hard!' she shouts to her father, sitting nearby. Her father responds, 'This is hard, and I see you working hard and trying different things to figure out how to keep your castle safe from the waves. Let's talk through what you've tried so far to help us figure this

out.' When the daughter successfully keeps her castle safe from the waves by constructing it further away from the shoreline and building a moat, the father says, 'Wow you worked really hard to keep your castle safe from the waves by moving away from the shoreline and making a moat, even though it was challenging,' rather than, 'You are so smart, I knew you could do it,' or 'Good Job!'

Joyful

The power of joy lasts a long time. Research shows that experiencing joy connects to memory, attention, creativity and motivation.

By sharing positive emotions and making problem-solving fun, parents can promote a sense of joy. This means that children are more likely to retain and be motivated to build on what they learn.



13. Share positive emotions

Children observe and copy the emotions of their parents and experiences of shared positive emotions between child and parent have ripple effects on a child's socioemotional development.*

Tip: Don't hold back expressing positive feelings with your child – share smiles and laughs whenever you can! And don't forget to model voicing feelings, so that children can learn to name emotions.



14. Find the fun

When parents respond playfully to difficult or stressful situations, children learn to cope with problems positively.

Tip: Use humour, flexibility, and creativity as an approach to solving problems that you and your child face.

Having a playful attitude to learning helps children to develop in a positive way.

* Note: We focus on how parents can promote joy in this paper as it is a characteristic of learning through play. However, this doesn't mean that you should hide more difficult emotions like frustration, sadness, or fear from your children! Children need to learn that all emotions are valid, and opportunities to watch their parents model how to manage all emotions – including difficult ones – are important. When parents help their child name emotions and cope with big feelings, their child builds strong social and emotional skills like self-awareness, empathy, and resilience.



15. Share interests and leisure activities

If you find and pursue common interests or pastimes with your child, you'll create a bond through which a sense of joy, pride, satisfaction and wellbeing will grow.

Tip: Share unstructured activities that promote joy for both you and your child. When your child is a baby, this may look like a fun game of peek-a-boo. As your child gets older, you can share activities like music, dance, games, art, or unstructured sport play.

Imagine a child who is learning the getting-ready-for-school routine. When he can't find his folder and lunchbox to put in his bag, he gets frustrated, plops down on the floor, and tells his mother he doesn't want to go to school anymore. His mother joins him on the floor and patiently says, 'I know you are frustrated. I feel frustrated when I can't find things I need, too. Something I like to do when this happens is to take a deep breath and, when I feel ready, I turn finding what is

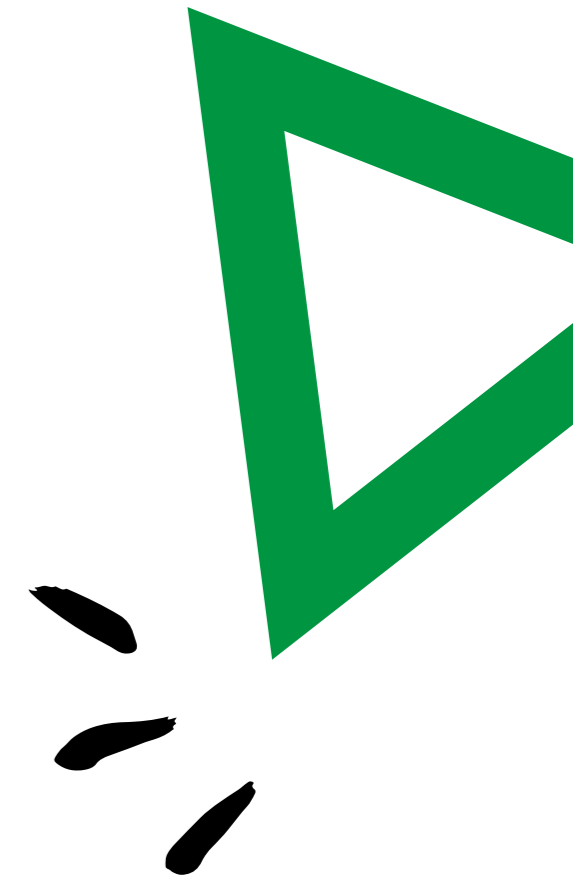
lost into a game. Do you want to try?' He nods and they take a deep breath together. Then, his mother whispers in a silly voice explaining that they are on a secret 'Get Ready for School mission, sets a timer for them, and they zoom around the house to find the missing items. They shout, 'Mission complete!' after they put all the school supplies in the son's bag. Here the mother models how to use fun and flexibility as an approach to solving a problem.

Closing Thoughts

Science elucidates the magic that lies within the everyday moments parents and children share. Parents can be empowered to use the principles of playful learning, and the approaches introduced in this paper, to find natural opportunities for joy and learning as they go about their day.

When we better understand what playful learning means to parents in different contexts, and involve parents as partners, we can create a movement for playful learning and joyful parenting. This movement gives parenting back to parents while simultaneously supporting children to develop a breadth of skills.

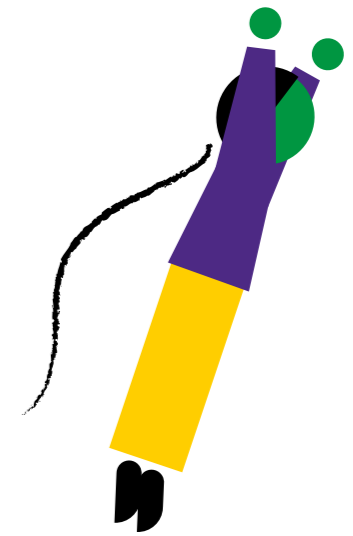
We know a world where parents and children share in the joy that is inherent to playful learning is possible. The Playful Learning & Joyful Parenting White Paper is just the first step towards our mission to empower all parents to feel confident and inspired to engage in playful learning anytime, anywhere.



References*

Zosh, J. M., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2018). Accessing the inaccessible: Redefining play as a spectrum. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, 1124.
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*Because this is a summary, there are few in-text citations. Please find complete in-text citations and a comprehensive reference list in the Playful Learning & Joyful Parenting White Paper.