

Learning Seeds

Nurture the teachable moment.

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Scaffolding your child's play with peers.

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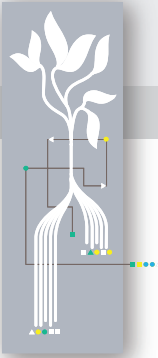


Why do stores give out free samples? They understand that when faced with something new, we are not yet motivated enough to pay the price for trying it.

By shadowing your child in play, your goal is to give them a free or discounted taste of how much fun play can be before he/she has to do all the hard work of listening, talking, compromising, and building cooperation. Use these Enlightened Shadowing techniques and ideas from the worlds of behavioral economics and advertising to help your child sample the joy of play with peers.

Value proximity.

How many of us knew what to do the first day of work? Age and schooling don't usually prepare you for your first day at a new job. You learn what to do by getting thrown in the deep end, surrounded by the work, and hearing the lingo of your colleagues. Even if your child is not yet having back and forth play interactions, he/she can still benefit immensely from play as long as you can find a pleasurable way to be near other kids.



Position the child so his/her face and chest are facing the group and remain close enough to hear what kids are saying and to hand things to peers.

Don't work towards complex interactions if your child is not yet motivated. Instead, just keep everyone in eye sight feeling comfortable with each other and occasionally handing off a toy or glancing at a peer's activity.

In my experience, about two months of proximity and two level play often blossoms into some great interest in play routines and real friendship moments.

Play like an undercover kid unless something is "hospital dangerous".

Children sometimes will see an adult playing and ask, "Are you a mom?, Are you his teacher?, Are you her babysitter?" Respond vaguely with a friendly dismissal like, "Oh, right now I'm just playing with everybody like a friend". Try not to use an authoritative tone or reprimand kids for telling potty jokes.

By restricting yourself to solving tough play problems in a way that other kids can emulate, the game will continue, with all it's obstacles, giving your child a much longer time, with you by his/her side, to learn to solve these problems. After all, if you force kids to be nice when you are around, they may avoid you or your child, and you will be very unlikely to influence how the play goes when you are not there.

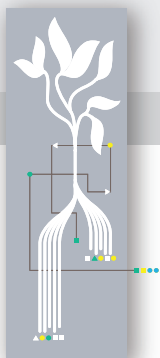
As long as things are not 'hospital dangerous' I suggest you try to solve the groups behavior as a member of a group instead of as an adult leader, imposing morality on the crowd. You can enlist the help of bystander kids to agree that something is not fair, or make a fun explanation for why "there can be two pilots for the ship".

Create a hub for the play.

Perhaps your child enjoys play but has trouble keeping up with the crowd or staying with the group. Children are far more geographic than we tend to be as adults.

Try scanning the area where you are going to play and look for a space, such as under the slide, that could be a nook with more than one way out, (you don't want your child to get stuck in the back). Then help the group get excited about this place by making it a "secret submarine" or a "clubhouse" in a tone that makes it sound like you've discovered a secret treasure. "Hey guys, c'mon here where we can store our diamonds!"

By creating a hub, the children will run off and return to the space and your child can stay comfortably and be visited by them each time they return.



Help everyone create their roles.

Meanness often arises out of uncertainty and can be alleviated not by high minded lectures, but by giving everyone a role in any activity.

Make sure a game they're engaged in has a mission. Help think up lots of creative characters so no one gets left out. Hunting for acorn treasures, collecting weeds as ingredients for potions, or building a computer robot with wood chips all help the group contribute to a common mission.

Look for screws and joints in the play equipment to serve as buttons to push. Use far off trees as a destination and surrounding nature for acorns to gather. Avoid debates over debate who can be "captain" by helping make up a variety of titles like, "Samantha is the flying captain and you can be the lookout captain, and this girl is the jet booster captain."

Ensure that your child's role allows for any sensory play he/she may want to do as well. If your child likes to sprinkle sand, make sure it is low enough that it doesn't get in people's eyes, and then help create a role as the "farmer sprinkling seeds". Then encourage peers to gather other seeds and twigs to give to your farmer to sprinkle, to grow different crops.

Build two-level play.

Nearly any couple at the movies can tell you that date night works best when a compromise film is chosen that each person likes, but they don't have to like the movie for the same reasons (and they rarely do)!

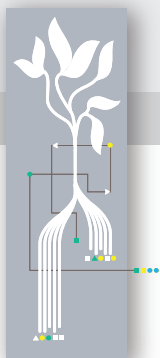
If your main goal for a play session is proximity, your child may not be yet participating in traditional ways in the play. Make up a theme that satisfies the peers desire for an imaginative story line but also explains the behavior that your child finds soothing or comforting. If your child likes to run behind peers stepping on their shadows, you can explain that, "You are the mommy bird and this is your baby and you are teaching him how to fly!"

Model mash-up themes.

If somebody can make great music by mixing Brittany Spears and Beethoven (yep, that's a thing. Google it!), then surely a fun game can be forged by mixing any peer play themes with your child's most beloved subjects.

Try to think of ways that peers will get more magical, more powerful or have more treats or treasure in the game by incorporating your child's character.

Try to find ways to encourage the type of interaction your child will enjoy by setting up the game so peers will hand your child things, or seek them out for a preferred behavior. If your child likes dinosaur facts, but peers are playing police, you might suggest, "Pretend alien dinosaurs came to town and this child is a super powerful dinosaur computer. Each time you ask him a question, he will tell you a dinosaur feature to use to defeat the enemy!"



Use positive “advertising” to create a welcoming mood for your child.

A few Enlightened Shadowing techniques I’ve borrowed from the world of advertising most always prove effective.

Name pairing.

Try singing a little song with the names of your child and a peer, and a brief description of their activity with lots of repetition. Hearing their names together frequently increases how often children reference one another and decreases bullying behaviors later in the play.

Commonalities.

Finding commonalities helps children see your child as a kid just like them. Focus on obvious visual details such as "Jim and John are both wearing green!"

Gift giving.

If your child picks up a pebble from the ground, grab a second one, place it in his/her palm, and help give it to a peer saying, "Here you go!" with a big smile. The first gift is usually met with puzzlement. But after a few are given out, enhanced with an explanation of how they are pretend magic, children switch from feeling unsure to asking your child for more.

Third party compliments.

When your child is not responding to peers, you can speak favorably to peers, on his/her behalf, as though you were an ambassador. "You are *soooo* nice to show Jane how far you can jump. She loves how good you are at playground tricks."

Don't hog the talking.

For every comment that comes your way from another child, respond with, "Tell him!" Even if you were just speaking on behalf of your child, send the replies directly to your kiddo.

If a child asks you, "Does Jane want to see me do the monkey bars?", you can smile enthusiastically and say "Ask Jane!". Then duck behind Jane and help prompt her by pointing to the peer. Encourage them to repeat if they get no response. Keep your tone positive and enthusiastic for both kids.

You can make questions easier for your child by turning them into a binary choice with key words repeated such as "Hey, this fun friend wants to go on the slide. No slides or Yes slides?" If they don't answer you might prompt, "We'll try it. Show us how!"

By finding ways to let play be its own reward, you'll be giving your child exposure to play which will lead to more skills and even more play.

Erica Key works with young children with autism by providing parent coaching, play sessions, and shadow training to help weave skills into each child's daily life. She can be reached at Erica@LearningSeeds.org