

Returning to School: How to Support Children's Emotional Well-Being Through Play

Do not keep children to their studies by compulsion but by play. - (Plato)

We have all had a tricky year, with huge upheavals across the world. Children's routines have been turned upside down and they have been forced to lead a very insular life. Access to friends and family have been restricted and very few, if any, extra-curricular activities have been running. Perhaps the biggest change of all is children missing school for prolonged periods of time.

Of course, it's been a widely different experience for all children but, sadly, and not surprisingly, emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic, and all its associated restrictions, are having a negative impact upon children's emotional wellbeing¹.

The cogs are slowly turning again and we are all hoping that life will start to return to something that feels more normal. Some children are back at school (hooray, shout the exhausted home-schooling parents!) and there are fewer restrictions more generally.

So, how do we best prepare children for learning in the classroom again? What do we need to focus on? How can we support them to manage yet another change? And how can we get them in the right place emotionally so they feel safe enough to learn?

We know that anxiety stifles curiosity. If we are going to help children transition back into school and all the learning opportunities that it offers, the first thing we need to focus upon is their social and emotional wellbeing. And what a better way to do this than through play?

¹. www.mentalhealth.org.uk "

Impacts of lockdown on the mental health of children and young people

■ The Importance of Play

Our brains are wired to play and wired through play.



With so many competing demands it can be difficult for us to put play at the top of the agenda. But there is a great deal of evidence of the benefits that play brings.

Play is not only an enjoyable part of childhood, but an important one. So vital, in fact, that it is recognised by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is crucial for mental health, physical, cognitive and social development. It allows children to engage in the world in a way that feels safe, explore different roles, address fears and develop confidence.

Children who have parents who actively engage in play with them learn about sharing, problem solving and decision-making more quickly than those who don't. Play also helps parents understand their child's world and shows that they are interested in them, both important aspects of developing a secure attachment relationship - the cornerstone of a child's development.

And when children are experiencing adversity and change, play helps them process what has been going on and prepare them for what might happen next. Prioritising time for children to play supports them to integrate their experiences into their inner mental worlds, helping them organise and feel more in control of their lives. As Erikson says "to 'play out' is the most natural self-healing method childhood affords".

■ How to Support your Child Through Play

Here are some ideas of different types of play you can engage in with your child.

Child-Led Play

Have you ever sat and watched your child playing? The themes emerging so often relate to their daily lives. Their actions often work through what has happened, and is, happening. Allowing children space to lead their play without an adult taking over is important. There may not be a clear purpose (in our minds at least!) or an obvious outcome, but child-led play provides the chance for children to express and make sense of what is going on.

I remember clearly how my 2-year-old spent a great deal of time pretending to be a dinosaur who “scared the Corona Virus away” at the beginning of the first lockdown. This gave him a sense of much needed control of a confusing situation.

Child-led play doesn't mean just leaving children to it (although there are times when this is helpful for everyone). You can still join in – just focus on what your child is doing without taking the lead (however frustrating it is when they just can't balance that tower!). Remember that child-led play is not about teaching, but about following your child.

Try not to worry if you feel a little out of your comfort zone - adults play seeking systems can need a little encouragement, especially when we have been under stress ourselves.

Attachment-Focused Play

Any play that focuses upon connection can be extremely beneficial for both parents and children. Cozonlino (2002) talks about the complex neuro-chemistry underlying mother-child bonding; “through a bio-chemical cascade, mother-child interactions stimulate the secretion of oxytocin, prolactin, endorphins and dopamine, which create positive and rewarding feelings.”² .

Attachment-focused play is characterised by shared activities involving eye contact and mirroring such as making up a special handshakes, drumming together and messy play. Try to ‘follow, lead, follow’ (Hughes³ .) whereby you let your child explore; show enjoyment in what they are doing, mirror it and build upon it for them (known as scaffolding). This helps children to experience reciprocal relationships and to learn that you can influence each other.

For children who haven't left your side for some time “object permanence” games (which show you going away but will come back) such as hide-and-seek can help them cope with increased separation anxiety that they may feel with the return to childcare or school.

². Cozolino (2002). The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain. Pg. 176

³. Hughes & Guerney-Smith (2020). The Little Book of Attachment: Theory to Practice in Child Mental Health with Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy.

Facilitated Play

At times it is helpful for parents to more actively guide a child's play. For example, through role-playing going back to school. This can help children mentally rehearse forthcoming changes, support them to understand feelings they may have around this and help them feel more prepared, and less anxious. Get some props and use your calmest teacher's voice. Remember to play out the things they are looking forward to as well as those that they are worried about.

It can be helpful to put your child's actions into words and include references to emotions, helping them to connect the dots. If your child is showing anxiety about being apart from you do try to help them make sense of this through validating the feelings and thinking together about how they can manage this.



In addition to making sense of experiences through play, stories can help children feel more settled. For example, *Please Stay Here - I Want You Near*⁴ is an interactive children's story for 2-4-year-olds which help them understand and manage separation anxiety.

Playing Outside

It is always a good idea to get outside. In my household sibling rivalry decreases by about 50% as soon as we walk out of the door (when the "who is getting in the front seat?" argument is resolved!). There is even evidence that outdoor imaginary play encourages the brain to mature faster than indoors (Burnett & Whittaker, 2005⁵.) so ensure you make time for playing outside.

This is a great blog about outdoor play in the early years <https://www.early-education.org.uk/news/guest-blog-kathryn-solly-outside-all-weathers>.

Be Playful

⁴ Cozolino (2002). *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain*. Pg. 176

⁵ Hughes & Guernsey-Smith (2020). *The Little Book of Attachment: Theory to Practice in Child Mental Health with Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy*.

Where play is the act of doing, playfulness is a way of being. Both are hugely important for children. Playfulness is about trying to keep communication positive and light. When parents are playful children are more likely to feel that they are enjoyable to be around which feeds into a positive sense of who they are.

Try to be playful as much as you can – sing, make up rhymes and do silly dances (although check out your child's response – I am banned from certain embarrassing dance moves, particularly when there are other people in the vicinity!). We know that laughter stimulates the release of feel-good chemicals, relaxes the body, increases positive feelings and improves relationships. Playful parenting therefore not only nurtures healthy connections your child's brain but in yours too.

As parents, we have been tasked to juggle more than usual this year, often leaving us feeling rushed, stressed and tired. This can make it harder to be playful and we can be pulled into tussles with our children more easily. We need to remember that children are struggling more than usual and now having to navigate yet another change with the return to school, and the anxieties this brings.

Focusing on playfulness as a core ingredient in your relationship will help you both feel more able to manage what the world is throwing at you. Anything that supports your child to feel more connected with you at home will go a long way in helping her feel more able to return to school, knowing there is a safe base to return to.

Facilitate Friendships

Children have missed out on a great deal of social interaction and may be very anxious about socialising again (remember the anxiety that built up over the long summer holidays when you were at school?). If you can find opportunities to connect and play with friends before their return this could be a great comfort.

Obviously, there are rules on how you can do this, according to your Country's restrictions, but do try to promote seeing friends in any way you can. This could be an outside walk or virtually. Do make sure you stay close to your little one; you will be their safety blanket in what may feel like unchartered waters.

Giving children the chance to play together helps them learn how to resolve conflicts and supports emotional and social development, lessons stress and increases empathy. And it may give parents a much-needed break too!



Help Children Unwind

Adapting to the demands of school may leave your children exhausted. It may be useful to set up a den with them at home so they have a cosy, protected space to unwind after the challenges of the school day. As well as having blankets and cuddly toys a box of sensory items, e.g., bubbles and playdough and a few stories may be useful. Think younger - books that your child used to enjoy when they were littler and are familiar can be reassuring to them.

| How Can Teachers Help?

There is always a push for schools to introduce more play into their curriculum rather than focus so much on academic learning. Unfortunately, with the pressure on teachers to help children “catch up” it is possible that importance of play may be forgotten in the classroom.

A child who is anxious about change and with worries about his friendships is much less likely to engage in their times tables. So, a plea to teachers. Focus first on your student’s social and emotional learning. Expect that they may need more support in understanding and managing their feelings, as well as negotiating the complex dynamics of friendships. I believe this needs to be the priority at the moment.

Many children have experienced a quieter and more relaxed pace of learning with greater adult supervision and will struggle with sensory overload when being back in a busy classroom. Increasing sensory breaks, with access to outside play, can help children calm themselves and be in a better place to engage with learning.

We also know that children can regress when under increase pressure. Making play resources that might normally be considered for the younger age groups (such as a role-play corner in Key Stage 2) may also benefit children’s emotional wellbeing.

I would also recommend the book “Serpentine and the Magic Bubbles” by Amanda Barrass, Play Therapist. This is written to help teachers to support young children’s emotional well-being as schools reopen (www.kernowplaytherapy.co.uk).

Parents and teachers have so much to do – packed lunches to make, lessons to plan, uniform to wash. But it's imperative that we don't forget to play, in school and at home. This will have a huge benefit to everyone's emotional wellbeing, whatever age we are.

Wishing you all good luck with forthcoming transitions.