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Make time to play: It signals that parents are available

Play helps fill a child's emotional needs, encourages cognitive, physical development

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After years of studying the family, one BYU professor says there is an important, often forgotten, thing parents can do for their children — make time each day for play.

"We forget how simple and beautiful play can be," said Chris L. Porter, a BYU associate professor of Marriage, Family and Human Development.

Play helps fill a child's emotional needs, develop social skills and encourages cognitive and physical development. It signals to a child that the parents are available to them, said Brother Porter.

However, in a busy world, many parents don't structure play in their lives.

"We don't take the time to do it," he said.

Some parents don't know how to be playful.

As an educator, Brother Porter said first-time parents often ask him: "What can I do to have a positive effect on my baby's life?"

His response is simple: "be playful." The No. 1 follow-up question, he said, is, "How do we play?"

Do whatever you want: play a game, read a book, go for ice cream, he tells them. Get down on the ground. Substitute time spent watching TV or playing video games. Be spontaneous. And start early, when the child is a baby.

Don't forget, however, to follow the baby's lead, be sensitive to the baby's signals to start or stop, try not to overstimulate, and adjust behavior to fit the child's, he added.

Make the play more complex as the child grows older and, most important, do something fun for both parent and child.

Some parents, he continued, get caught up in the idea that their children have to have "the best" toys. In reality, however, children can find joy in the simplest objects. Look at a picture book, he said. Play peek-a-boo or tag. Throw a ball. Talk with each other.

"Sometimes parents forget that they have the ability to enjoy (their children)," he said. "They get frustrated and stressed. We forget to take the opportunity to really enjoy being with our children."

Brother Porter noted that every parent has bad days, days when it takes all a parent's energy to gain peace amid the challenges. It can be effective for the parent to take a break and give the child attention, even for five or 10 minutes. "A

lot of acting up behavior is designed for seeking attention," he said. "Sometimes, children have a need to have someone's focus. If we respond with kindness and patience and love, instead of getting upset and angry, it tends to diffuse the situation."

One-on-one attention — especially as a child gets older — signals to a child that a parent is available psychologically and emotionally. It signals that a parent "sees (the child) as a person worthy of our time and attention."

That, he said, is one of the great advantages of play.

Children are born with a natural inclination to explore the world, he explained. "When a child is supported in her efforts to explore, it fosters a natural sense of curiosity that leads to opportunities for discovery and growth."

Take, for example, the game peek-a-boo. "Through the game's basic structure she learns how to take turns. Turn-taking will become the foundation for important skills like carrying on conversations and sharing with others. She also learns how to appropriately express and experience emotions like delight and joy. Perhaps most important, because someone has taken the time to play, she learns that somebody loves and cares for her."

It is easy to observe a parent who has learned to play with their children, Brother Porter said. Children have a great sense of security and a greater sense of attachment to parents they play with.

Research, he said, supports a variation on a common saying about families praying together, "Families that play together, stay together."