

Child Directed Play

Definition: Child Directed Play, called CDP for short. A one-on-one play interaction between a parent and a child in which the child directs and leads the play in any way he or she wishes (unless there is harmful or destructive activity, see below). Known by other names; Child's Game, Floor Time.

Recommended Age of Child: Primarily for children ages 2 to 7, but can be modified for interactions with children through adolescence.

Objectives of CDP:

1. To enhance the child's sense of appropriate control, self-regulation and self-confidence.
2. To provide an opportunity for the child's access to focused, uninterrupted adult attention and close contact, without having to rely on negative or provocative behaviors to do so.
3. To improve the attunement or "dance" between the parent and child and the child's sense of confidence and security in that relationship. This allows for more subtle and effective interactions in the future.

Procedure

Adult Behaviors to Do

Follow the child's play and other behaviors

- Locate yourself physically close to the child. If he is on the floor, you will be on the floor. Within reason, move with the child.
- Watch the child's play activities closely.

Describe what you observe

- Verbally describe some of what your child is doing with the play materials. Be specific. Be brief. For example, "You put the red block on the blue block", "There goes the car", "Here it comes!". Show enthusiasm.

Imitate some of what your child does

- Physically repeat something your child does with the play materials; put one block on another, make your car go, and so on.
- Verbally repeat something your child has said; “Look out, the car is coming”, “That flower is going to be red”, and so on. You can also imitate nonverbal sounds and vocalizations; “Woo hoo!”, “Vrroom”,

Praise occasionally

- **Use sparingly.** If you are going to praise, focus on some quality of your child, rather than the object he has made. For example, if he makes a nice tower with the blocks you would say, “You’re a great tower builder” rather than, “That’s a great tower”.
- You can praise some action, such as “You’re being very careful with the paints”. But this too should be done sparingly.

Adult Behaviors to Avoid**Commands**

Do not give commands regarding your child’s behavior or the toys; e.g., “Let’s play with the house” or “don’t get out the blocks yet”. Handling misbehavior is described below.

Changing the Direction of the Play

Do not change direction of the play. This is for your child to decide and maintain or change as he wishes. Refrain from giving your child your play ideas.

Teaching

CDP is not a time to quiz your child, rehearse skills, or teach new facts or concepts. Allow your child to play with the toys or materials in any way that is not harmful. Remember- there is no “right” way to play.

Questions

Questions can be a subtle way of attempting to take control of the play or to teach; “What color is that block?”, “Do you want to play with the shark?”.

Handling Misbehavior

Children rarely misbehave during CDP once they figure out it is their special and undemanding play time. In the event of destructive, annoying, or physically aggressive behaviors stop the play, briefly explain why you’ve stopped it (the child’s specific behavior), and tell your child that the play cannot continue if the behavior continues. Describe the behavior you expect (gentle, respectful, etc.). If the problem behavior continues, stop the CDP until the next scheduled time. At that time you can **briefly** restate the rules about expected behavior.

Please note: CDP is sacred time. It should not be used as a reward nor taken away as a punishment. If your child is misbehaving close to the time you are scheduled to do CDP, remind him that your special time together is coming up and you hope he will be calm and ready to enjoy it. If your child chooses not to do CDP with you, matter-of-factly accept that choice and move on. CDP will be available to him next as scheduled.

Handling Your Own Reactions

As the adult in the CDP interaction you may notice any of a number of responses that are very common.

Implementing Child Directed Play at Home

Setting

Pick a quiet place where you will not be disturbed by siblings, T.V., the phone, pets, and so on.

When / How Long / How Often

Do CDP 2 to 3 times per week for 10 to 15 minutes per session. It’s best to do CDP on as regular a schedule as possible; e.g., Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 7:00 to 7:15. Set a timer so that your child will know how much time is left in the play.

Make sure the CDP time does not conflict with or compete with your child's favorite T.V. show or other valued activity.

Types of Toys

Toys that the child already knows and likes are often best.

Competitive games are to be avoided as are any games or toys that are highly structured (e.g., lots of rules to follow). Computer and video games, even two-player games, are to be avoided. Ideally, you want activities that create possibility and the use of imagination.

Reading books or playing sports are not ideal for child directed play.

How to present CDP to your child

Explain to your child that this is his "special time" with you and you alone.

Tell him of the time limit.

Show him the choice of toys or materials you've picked out **and have ready ahead of time**.

If the child says 'No' to your offer or the choice of toys, don't argue or push. Offer again the next day. You can do some negotiating about the toys available as long as you stay within the above guidelines. Remind your child that he has many other opportunities to play computer games or other activities not suitable for CDP.