



Parent-In-Training

How to Play with Your Child

Written by Decca Knight

When talking with parents, I often ask how they play with their child. Answers usually include watching TV, playing video games and practicing sports. But this isn't play; this is simply existing "beside" your child.

Do you remember how we used to play? Yes, I know that I sound like an annoying old lady reminiscing about those nostalgic years. We used to play clapping games, build forts in the woods, roll down grassy hills, and create villages out of Lincoln Logs and blocks. We role-played, brainstormed creative fantasylands, and stared into each other's eyes until someone blinked. Such interactions strengthened not only our creative minds, but also our relationships. They fostered an authentic connection with those around us.

Such play, however, is often difficult for parents. There are various reasons for this. First off, we have to relinquish control to our children. We have to allow them to create and lead the play. This means that if they want to build a precarious block tower—and then knock it down with abandon—we let them. If they want us to play house with them and the refrigerator is in the bedroom, we don't correct them. If they want us to stomp through the mud in the river bottom with them, we tamper our

anxiety about ruining our clothes. Think about the joy you would have felt as a child if an adult had played with you in this way, allowing you to reach the bounds of your joy and imagination. But as adults, we often "get in the way" of our children, because of our own judgment and discomfort.

Another reason that parents struggle in playing with their children is that adults tend to make everything educational. Yes, we all want our child to be the next Einstein, but they spend enough time at school learning and studying. When they are not in school, they should be allowed to engage in free play. If a child is out in the woods collecting acorns, we shouldn't turn it into a game of addition and subtraction. If a child is lying in the grass, looking at cloud shapes, we shouldn't try to identify the various types of cloud formations. If a child is engaged in creating a nature journal, we shouldn't scold them for misspellings. We shouldn't suck the joy out of playing; we just need to let our children "be."

So, when playing with your child, step back. Allow them to drive the play, create the stories, get dirty, and exist in the bliss that is childhood. We all know that this time is fleeting, so allow your child to bask in its wonders.



Decca Knight is a wife, mother, counselor, and parenting educator. In an effort to further help kids and parents, Decca began studying a variety of parenting philosophies. She teaches classes, consults with other "Parents-in-training," and runs Blue Ridge Parenting and Consulting LLC. For more information about parenting classes and consultation visit Decca's website www.blueridgeparenting.com

