



Playing for Connection!



Children, after trauma or separation, often have difficulty connecting with others. Also, they may have had a limited chance to influence their environment. Play is natural for children- through their play, with your support, they can experience **connection and acceptance**.

Play activities may be **indoors** or **outdoors**. Indoor may include art, music, dancing, board games, building blocks, and dramatic play. Outdoor may include play with sand, dirt, playground equipment, or water. Also, use everyday items. For example, sheets can be capes or tents, cardboard boxes can become stoves or houses.

Schedule play when you and your child are **at your best**. Set a **distraction free environment**- silence phones and turn off electronics. You may also select the place and type of play, but let your child choose how they will play. Your focus should be observing and providing feedback. The play can be "on the run" or "planned" into your schedule in segments as short as 10 or 15 minutes. **Do what is comfortable** for you and your child- one of the goals should be for both of you to be playful.

Give your **undivided attention** during play. Connection is more likely when you are focused on the child. Watch intently what the child is doing, how they are playing, and their emotions, and share your observations with the child. For example, if building with blocks, comment on the colors used and height. You can let them know you are proud of their accomplishments- **praise builds the child's self-esteem**, and is important to establishing communication, connection, and experience influencing their environment. The point is to let the child know **you are engaged in a positive way**.

Also, children from chaotic situations can be "tone deaf" to normal adult speech and interaction. Overcome this by using **exaggerated voices** and **gestures**, such as clapping hands and excited exclamations to help kids hear praise and recognition. Children pay attention to adult words they don't understand. Using words like structure, architect, biologist, design, and others will capture their attention. At first, being dramatic or using new words may seem uncomfortable, but it will become fun for you and the child.

Your child may display **frustration** during play. If the level is minimal, encourage them to keep going with liberal praise and offer some tips to make success easier. If the play activity becomes too difficult, ask if you can join in the activity and help. Praise their accomplishments, comment on how much work they did, and compliment their creativity. **Comment on anything that can help them feel successful**.