

# SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

## Independent Play

**Question:** How can I get my child to play on her own?

Learning how to play independently is a valuable skill that involves Focus and Self Control. There are ways you can help your child develop this life skill as you support her in playing on her own.

**Focus and Self Control:** involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly, and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

**1**

### Support your child's interests.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Davis says: "Children possess an inborn imagination and a passion to explore and learn."

Caring strongly about interests beyond yourself takes true focus. Children are more likely to spend time immersed in play when they are deeply interested in or passionate about what they are doing.

- **Watch your child and talk with her about what she is interested in.** Look for books, toys or other materials that could spark her imagination and extend her play. Your encouragement is crucial to your child's move toward independence.

**2**

### Encourage your child to ask her own questions and explore.

Laura Schulz of MIT conducted an experiment with preschoolers to investigate the role of curiosity in learning by giving children pop-up toys where it wasn't clear which handle made which little toys pop up. She finds that children are more likely to stick one of these toys instead of moving on to something new when adults don't show them how the toy works, but let them explore. Schulz observes: [Children] keep playing until they discover how it really works.

Curiosity is powerful. When your child is curious, she is motivated to wonder and learn more. There are many ways for you to foster curiosity in your child.

- **Use open-ended questions and comments to focus your child's attention and extend her pretend play.** You can say things like: "I wonder where your train is going?" Or "Yum, I see you're cooking something. What will you put in it?"

Try not to take charge; you are helping your child learn to take the lead in managing herself.

- **When your child shows genuine interest in something, no matter how little it may seem to you, take the time to acknowledge her curiosity.** Talk with her about it. You are modeling focused attention for your child, while showing that her ideas are valuable to you.

## 3

## Help your child develop her own ideas for playing independently.

Maureen Callanan of the University of California at Santa Cruz studies parents and their role in promoting children's learning in everyday activities. She says:

*What I think is important about the way parents tend to respond is that they are usually encouraging the kids to do this kind of questioning, guiding them in thinking about how [to find their own] answers to questions.*

You can help your child become more independent in her play by coming up with practical ideas to set up some times she will play on her own.

- **Make a plan.** Explain that you are going to have some time where your daughter plays by herself. Ask her what she would like to do during that time so she makes a plan, even if it is for a few minutes.
- **Evaluate how the plan worked.** After she has tried out this plan, ask her how it worked. What made it work well? What didn't work and needs to be changed?
- **Create an activity list together.** As your child becomes more comfortable spending small amounts of time playing by herself, then make a list of activities with her that she can do on her own. Post this list where she can see it, using pictures or words to help her remember and "read" the list.

By giving your child some control over how to spend her time and encouraging a system with plans that are later reviewed, you are helping your child develop independence. You are also helping your child develop working memory skills, which are involved in creating and following through with plans.

## 4

## Engage your child in games that promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control.

Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child's mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you are doing more than helping your child become more independent. You are teaching your child a fundamentally helpful approach to life.

- Guessing games and puzzles require your child to pay attention.
- Games that have rules and sorting games build working memory, self control and flexible thinking when the rules are changed.