Reflections on Play

Play is such a basic element of childhood. It is a way of learning to interact with the world and each other, trying out different roles, learning social skills and a way to express our own uniqueness that enables us to become fully ourselves. It can also be good fun.

I have been thinking about play a lot in work at the moment. In our play groups, we encourage child directed play. This is where children lead. We take the invitation to enter their world and follow their lead and their pace. It offers us a space to praise and encourage their creativity and self-discovery. It can be a wonderful time where we level the playing field between parent and child to a place where we are equals. It builds on the bond between parent and child and increases their attachment, this often results in a more contented and well behaved child, as they know they will have their one to one time with mom or dad.

I have to laugh when I think back on one incident with my eldest daughter. It was a time when my inner child wanted to play and the parent took the back seat.

Every game she wanted to play, I played too. Most games involved me being the mom and her being my daughter (yes this was real life too). We often had a baby doll thrown in for good measure and a small handmade wooden kitchen as a prop. The baby doll was plastic and smelled like talcum powder.

I remember one particular time my daughter mixed it up a little. We didn’t play baby game we played coffee shop game. I was still the mom, with the plastic doll, and she was the waitress.

Ella was 7 and I had enough of playing make believe, make belief that was in fact a mirror of my life. I decided to shake things up. I was going to redefine my role. After rummaging through my wardrobe, I turned up in the coffee shop in a large, wide brimmed, plum coloured, felt hat, a floral, tasselled scarf with dusty pink roses printed on it and a gold sparkly evening clutch. Now I was cooking.

I flounced in barking orders in my very best impression of an obnoxious posh lady. I ordered tea, profiteroles, sandwiches and ice cream. I was having a great time and really getting into character.

Ella looked at me with a suspicious eye. Not saying much she dutifully took down my order and started putting a tray together. I was really getting into the swing of things, loving my new character. I started discussing the weather, my surroundings and anything else that came into my mind. After I while I noticed that she wasn’t engaging that much. Standing beside her well worn, beloved wooden kitchen, with her polka dot apron on and her soft wavy hair framing her little round face, I noticed she was observing me and not playing with me.

I paused. I began to think that maybe, just maybe, she didn’t like my new character. That’s when I saw it, the look on her face that can only really be described in two words. Utter disdain.

“What’s wrong”, I asked, “do you not like my coffee shop lady”.

“Can you just be normal.” Yes, she said that to me. She was in no way impressed with my re interpretation of the coffee shop game. In fact she wouldn’t even play with me anymore. She took off her little polka dot apron and walked away.

“I don’t want to play anymore”.

This was definitely not child directed and because of it my daughter walked away. It is a funny story for the two of us to share. It also highlights a good point, you can always tell when you are doing
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something right with your child by their response. It could be playing Lego, colouring in or playing make believe with a farm set. How well you are engaging will often be reflected in your child’s response to you. You can read all the parenting books you want, but nothing will tell you more about how you are doing than your child’s response to you. Is she enjoying herself? Is she happy? Is it fun?

We can get caught up in whether our parenting is good or bad, or if we are doing things right or wrong. As with everything we can over think things and parenting is certainly one of them. I use my children as a guide, when I engage with them I like it to be fun, I like to enter their world and give their ideas and voice centre stage. It is not always possible in a busy household but I do it enough that we enjoy each other’s company, they like hanging out with me and I like hanging out with them. For me that is good enough.

We run the Incredible Years Parenting* courses in work for the Community Mothers Programme and the Parenting Support programme. In those courses, there is a big emphasis on child directed play. Below are some pointers I pulled out from the manual.

Playing with your child using child directed play;

- fosters positive interaction and reduces behaviour problems
- balances power between parents and children
- builds the child’s self-esteem and creativity
- respects the child’s ideas
- develops physical, cognitive, social & emotional skills.

Tips for child directed play;

- encourage your child to explore
- follow your child’s lead & pace
- don’t compete with your child
- be attentive, praise & appreciate your child
- laugh, have fun & enjoy your child.

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* http://www.incredibleyears.com/