LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY
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Everyday Play Meaningful Growth

Quick Play Ideas for Children Aged 3 to 7

What is Playfulness?

Playfulness is a child's tendency to approach activities in a playful way. Children can express playfulness in different ways. Research describes five connected dimensions: physical spontaneity (moving and exploring), social spontaneity (joining others in play), cognitive spontaneity (thinking imaginatively and flexibly), manifest joy (showing delight and enjoyment), and sense of humour (enjoying silliness, surprise and fun) (Barnett, 1991; Fung & Chung, 2023).

Play at home

Play at home does not need special toys, expensive materials or lots of preparation. Simple everyday moments can give children opportunities to move, communicate, imagine, solve problems and enjoy being together.

The activities below are organised around the five dimensions of playfulness. Use them flexibly to suit your child's age, interests and everyday routine.

Physical Spontaneity

Move & Explore: how children move, explore and respond through their bodies.

Balloon Balance Challenge

Steps

1. Blow up a balloon and keep it in the air without letting it touch the ground.
2. Try using different body parts, such as hands, elbows, knees, shoulders, or feet.
3. Count how many touches your child manages before the balloon falls.
4. Or work together to keep it moving for as long as possible.

- Encourage your child to try different ways of moving and balancing, rather than getting it "right".

- Allow hands only
- Remove the counting element
- Tap the balloon gently back towards them

- Add extra rules, e.g. using a different body part each time
- Moving around the room
- Trying to reach a shared target.

Social Spontaneity

Play Together: how children join others in play, respond to interaction and share their ideas.

Mirror Me

Steps

1. Stand or sit facing your child.
2. Begin with a simple movement, such as raising your arms, clapping or swaying.
3. Invite your child to copy you like a mirror.
4. After a few turns, swap roles and let your child lead while you copy them.

- Keep movements clear and simple at first.
- Respond warmly when your child takes the lead.

- Use only one movement at a time and keep the pace slow.
- Stay with familiar actions such as clapping or waving.

- Add short movement sequences or themed actions, such as moving like an animal or pretending to be sleepy, excited, or surprised.

Cognitive Spontaneity

Imagine & Invent: thinking imaginatively and flexibly, exploring possibilities and new ideas.

What Else Could It Be?

Steps

1. Show your child an everyday object and ask, "What else could it be?"
2. For example, a spoon might become a microphone, a magic wand, or a tiny boat.
3. Take turns suggesting different pretend uses and acting some of them out together.

- Accept unusual or silly answers warmly and show interest in how your child explains them.
- Keep the atmosphere playful and curious.

- Model some ideas first.
- Use large, familiar objects.
- Give more examples before asking your child to suggest one.

- Invite your child to choose an object.
- Lead the game, or combine two objects in one pretend idea.

Manifest Joy

Enjoy the Moment: how children show delight, enthusiasm and positive feelings during play.

Giggle Freeze Dance

Steps

1. Play music and invite your child to dance freely.
2. When the music stops, everyone freezes in place.
3. Each time the music pauses, encourage a playful pose, facial expression, or "freeze like" theme, such as freezing like a superhero, a robot, or a sleepy cat.

- Model playful participation
- Allow laughter and mistakes
- Keep the atmosphere light and encouraging, and let your child suggest new freeze ideas.

- Use slower music and simple freeze positions.
- Keep the stopping and starting predictable.

- Add more specific themes
- Ask your child to lead the music controls
- Create a sequence of poses.

Sense of Humour

Enjoy Silliness: how children enjoy silliness, surprise, funny ideas and shared laughter.

Nonsense Chef

Steps

1. Pretend to cook the most ridiculous meal possible.
2. Your child might make banana soup with sock sprinkles, broccoli ice cream, or spaghetti with toy car toppings.
3. Take turns inventing recipes, describing the ingredients, and pretending to serve the dish.

- Accept absurd ideas with enthusiasm
- Ask questions such as "What should we add next?" or "Who would eat this?

- Start with one funny ingredient and one familiar food item.

- Create a full menu
- Name the restaurant
- Advertise the funniest dish.

Want More Play Ideas?

The full guide includes more activities, age adaptations, parent support ideas and information about how playfulness can support children's learning and development.

Full Play Guide

Feedback

Parent support
Level down
Level up

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