

# “Special Play Time:” What Is It and How Can It Help?

Play is important to children because it is the most natural way children communicate. Toys are like words for children and play is their language. Children use toys to explore their experiences and express what they think and how they feel. Parents can receive coaching by a child therapist to create a special structured 30-minute playtime with their child using a kit of carefully selected toys in their own home. Parents learn how to respond empathically to their child's feelings, build their child's self-esteem, help their child learn self-control and self-responsibility, and set therapeutic limits during these special playtimes.

**The parent creates an accepting relationship in which a child feels safe to express, through play, their fears, likes, dislikes, wishes, anger, loneliness, joy, or feelings of failure. This is not a typical playtime. It is a special playtime in which the child leads and the parent follows. During this special relationship, there are NO:**

- **Reprimands**
- **Put-downs**
- **Evaluations**
- **Requirements (to draw pictures a certain way, etc.)**
- **Judgments (about the child or his play as being good or bad, right or wrong)**



## How Can It Help My Child?

When children experience special play time with a parent in which they feel accepted, understood, and cared for, they play out many of their problems and, in the process, release tensions, feelings, and burdens. Your child will then feel better about themselves, and will be able to discover their strengths and assume greater self-responsibility.



## Adapted From:

Copyright © 2006, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC. From Child Parent Relationship Therapy (CPRT) Treatment Manual: A 10 Session Filial Therapy Model for Training Parents, by Bratton, S., Landreth, G., Kellam, T., & Blackard, S.R. (2006). New York: Routledge.

# Special Playtime with Parent & Child

A technique to strengthen the relationship b/w parent and child by using 30 minute playtimes once a week.



**“Be With” Attitudes:**  
**Your intent in your actions, presence, and responses is what is most important to convey to your child:**  
**“I am here—I hear/see you—I understand—I care.”**



## Basic Principles for Play Sessions:

### 1. SET THE STAGE

Structuring an atmosphere in which the child feels free to determine how to use the 30-minute play session. The child leads while the parent follows by showing interest and observing the child's play, without suggestions or questions, as well as actively joining the play when invited by the child.

### 2. PARENT'S MAJOR TASK

Empathize with the child: to understand the child's thoughts, feelings, and intent expressed in play by seeing, and experience the child's play through their eyes.

### 3. COMMUNICATE UNDERSTANDING BY:

a) verbally describing what the child is doing/playing, b) verbally reflecting what the child is saying, and c) most importantly, by verbally reflecting the feelings that the child is actively experiencing through his play.

### 4. BE CLEAR & FIRM ABOUT THE FEW LIMITS

Limits to be set are: time limits, not breaking toys or damaging items in the play area, and not physically hurting self or parent. Limits are to be stated only when needed, but applied consistently across sessions.



## Goals of the Play Session

1. To allow the child, through play, to communicate thoughts, needs, and feelings to his parent, and for the parent to communicate that understanding back to the child.

2. Through feeling accepted, understood, and valued—for the child to experience more positive feelings of self-respect, self-worth, confidence, and competence—and ultimately develop self-control, responsibility for actions, and learn to get needs met in appropriate ways.

3. To strengthen the parent-child relationship and foster a sense of trust, security, and closeness for both parent and child.

4. To increase the level of playfulness and enjoyment between parent and child.

**\*\*Never use Special Playtime for a reward or consequence—NO matter what the child's behavior is that day!**



## Play Session Procedure Checklist

### A. Prior to Session:

- Make arrangements for other family members & pets (so that there will be no interruptions).
- Set up toys--keep toy placement predictable.
- Have a clock visible in the room

B. Beginning the Session: Hang “Do Not Disturb” sign for no interruptions.

### C. During the Session:

- Sit on the same level as child, close enough to show interest but allowing enough space for child to move freely.
- Play actively with the child, if the child requests your participation.
- Verbally reflect what you see and hear (child's play/activity, thoughts, feelings).
- Give five-minute advance notice for session's end and then a one-minute notice.

D. Ending the Session: Announce when time is over. Do not exceed time limit by more than two to three minutes.