Talk with children about their play

Although most children will play without the help of adults, your help can take their play a little further. Here’s what you can do:

1. Talk with children about what they are doing when they play.

By describing what they are doing, you give them words: “You’re putting the food in the shopping cart. Now you are taking the food out of the shopping cart.” Children also learn ideas such as “in” and “out” when you put the words together with what they are doing.

2. Ask questions to help children expand their play.

When you see a child putting a doll in the stroller, you can help the play by asking, “Are you going to the store or to the library?” This idea can help children think more about their play. You can also help children to get a better understanding of the roles that they are playing by asking questions. For example, most young children know that superheroes fight but they may need help to think of other things superheroes might do, like eat, sleep, clean, care for their equipment, and take care of their children, among many other things. Your questions can help start a new line of play. Children might have their superheroes cooking breakfast or going to sleep as part of their play.

3. Help children to keep playing when there are sharing problems.

Often two children will want to use the same things at the same time. Both children might want the milk carton for pouring milk on their pretend cereal at the same time. One way to handle this problem is to help the children use their imaginations to solve the problem. You might say, “Since the mommy has the milk carton, what could the daddy use for the milk for his cereal?” Children may be able to use a block for a milk carton.
4. Talk with children to help them stay in their roles.

When children have a problem sharing it may cause some great play to fall apart. One thing that you can do is to help the children solve their sharing problems and stay in their roles. You might say, “Let’s help firefighter Nathan find another hose.”

5. Help children solve their own play problems.

Even very young children can learn how to talk, listen, and try out ideas when they have a problem getting along during play. Your role is to help them to talk about their ideas, not to solve the problem for them.

If the children are fighting over a toy, start by saying, “We have a problem.” Then ask each child to tell you what they think the problem is. Help each child to listen to the words of the other child. “Sam wants the block to make his airport.” Ask each child to tell you a solution to the problem. Repeat their ideas so that the other child can hear them and decide if they think that it is something that he or she would be willing to try. If both children agree to an idea, help them to give it a try. If both children cannot come to an agreement, give them some ideas to try. You might say, “What if Sam uses the block for his airport and when he is finished, Max can use it for his fire station?” Be sure to give the children time to come up with their own solutions before you give them your ideas.

6. Help children who are having trouble playing a theme.

Sometimes children become over-excited by a play theme. They might push, hit, or kick, making it hard for other children to play. When a child starts this aggressive behavior, ask her to draw or write a story about the play. Sometimes telling the story through drawing and writing can help a child to be calmer in her play. She may be able to play it later with others. Remind this child often that this story is pretend and not real. Talking about real and pretend can help children to feel safer when they are playing frightening and exciting play themes.