

## **Children At Play**

You have probably watched in amazement as children zoom their cars around the room, launch rockets to the moon, dance as ballerinas, and build mighty cities. These are the years of creativity and imagination. Children are able to play and explore freely. They are curious and excited about their world and want to learn as much as they can about what is going on around them. This is the time of asking many questions, shouting, running, and playing.

With the prevalence of video games and television, many fear that their children will lose their imaginations and creativity. The techniques of imagination and creativity are important for your child. Not only do these "skills" open up new areas for exploration, but they help teach the skills needed to "think outside the box". It is a useful skill to be able to look at problems and develop creative solutions to them--one that will serve your child well once they enter the workforce.

Imagination and creativity are not dying in children. However, we do need to provide opportunities for our children to use these natural gifts. There are things that you can do to spark the imagination of your child--and which do not involve the use of TV or videogames. Be warned, however, that these

steps will require that you throw off your "adult" role, stop focusing on adult worries, and even get down on the floor to play. To do these things means that you will have to throw away your "director's chair" and become an active participant in the play. You can gently guide, but you can't take over.

As your child plays, sit down with him and join in the fun. Follow his lead and let him provide some direction for the activity. Perhaps he can show you how to paint or how to build with blocks. As you and your child play, ask questions about the activity (e.g. "What's the name of this city? Who lives here? What kinds of things do they do?"). Through these questions, the play and the story can expand.

Remember to ask open-ended questions rather than "yes-no" questions. Open-ended questions such as those in the previous paragraph will allow your child to expand upon her story. However, take care that you don't control the plot (a very adult tendency). Allow your child to be spontaneous in their responses. Often, we tend to censor what children say (e.g. "Be nice", "Barbie shouldn't hit Ken", etc.). During this playtime, you may want to focus on feelings that your child is expressing (e.g. "Barbie must feel angry at Ken. What is she angry about?"). You can also help your child explore alternatives through play (e.g. "What else can Barbie do to show Ken she's mad.").

Finally, avoid the tendency to "drill" your child. Adults always want children to practice colors and numbers and letters. As adults, we seem to have a difficult time in "just playing". However, even the best of us get tired of performing and testing. If you must review colors and numbers, you can do so through integration into the play (e.g. "Will you hand me 2 red blocks?").

Play is a wonderful way to learn about the world and self. Your child will probably benefit as well!