

Parent-Led Play vs. Child-Led Play: Which is Better for Young Children?

By M.E. Picher, MA

Two-year-old Samantha is trying for the seventh time to stuff a trapezoid into a diamond-shaped slot. Isn't it time to put the frustrated toddler out of her misery and show her how it's done? What about five-year-old Felix, who seems to gravitate a little too often to the black crayon in the coloring box? Is that not an appropriate time to intervene and remind him about the other 63 colours?

To lead or not to lead? It's a question many parents ask themselves when playing with their young kids.

Throughout my experiences facilitating educational playgroups for parents and young children, I have come to the conclusion that most of us tend to either be a "hands-on" kind of player—vigilantly guiding, instructing and, in some cases, correcting our children's play; or we tend to be a "hands-off" kind of player—casually allowing our kids to explore, scale, throw and disassemble every object that they come across.

Is one way of playing better than another?

As a longtime student of Play and Child Development, I tend to think that both parent-led play, (that is play that is primarily directed by the parent) and child-led play, (that is play that is primarily directed by the child), have their merits and their pitfalls.

When parent-led play works well, the child feels nurtured, engaged and encouraged by her parent's lead.

Perhaps the best example of this is when a parent initiates a game of Peek-a-boo with her eight-month-old. Through this structured and repetitive interaction, the infant becomes enthralled, as she is gently encouraged to guess when her mother's face might reappear. Inevitably, her mother's face reemerges, reassuring her of what she already knows, that her mother will always be there.

When parent-led play does not work well, the parent unnecessarily interferes with or takes over the child's decision-making, problem-solving and/or creative process. These are the kind of players that like to play by the rules, find it difficult to watch their children struggle over a problem or have a hard time resisting the teacher's role.

A prime example of this is the parent who corrects her child's color-choice when she chooses purple for her picture of the sky. (If this is you, don't worry, we've all done

it) but I think it is important to ask ourselves why we do it? Is it out of fear that our child won't eventually figure out that the sky is actually blue?

The fact is, that when a correction like this is given *repeatedly* to a young child, most kids feel thwarted, inadequate, disappointed or disinterested, which in extreme cases can lead to low self-esteem or, depending on the child, flat-out rebellion.

Child-led play, at its best, boosts children's confidence and self-worth. A great example of this is the parent who watches with awe and admiration as his child, constructs a tower out of toilet paper rolls or turns the saltshaker (while waiting for his food at the diner) into a rocket ship, blasting off into space.

There is nothing more positive for a child's imagination than an interested parent, who shows curiosity about his child's creations. And, when children sense their parents' enthusiasm they are way more likely to invite them into the fun, which is fantastic for the parent-child relationship.

When child-led play is not as effective, the parent watches the child from a far-off distance, lackadaisically complementing the child on building an enormous fort out of the living room cushions until she notices the giant mess and screams for everything to be picked up. (Don't worry, we've all done this one too).

When it comes down to it, children, not only know whether they're being watched, they know how they're being watched and divided attention (or surveillance, for that matter) doesn't feel as good as watchful consideration.

Now, am I suggesting that we should watch our kids play with avid interest and devoted attention all the time? No, of course not. That's not practical or even beneficial. What I am suggesting though, is that when we decide to set aside time to follow our children's lead in play, we actually pay attention to where they're taking us. The journey is always well worth the time.

About the Author

M.E. Picher, MA is Co-founder and Creative Director of Wholeplay, an early childhood development and parenting service in Toronto, dedicated to providing a quality development and learning experience for young children and their parents. Wholeplay offers parent-child play classes and individual parent consultation services to parents and children, ages 0 months -6 years old. To learn more about Wholeplay's classes and services visit www.wholeplay.ca