

# Special Playtime Lets Children Assert Their Needs

by Linda Seymour

**During** a one-to-one session of Special Playtime, your child may ask you to do things you usually prefer not to do. For instance, if you are a more sedate personality, she may ask you to run around with her. If you have trouble letting her make her own decisions, she might boss you around the entire time. She may want to disobey household rules. Yes, let her climb up on the kitchen table, and no, she still can't draw with crayons on the wall, though you might put newsprint up.

This is Special Playtime, when most household rules are temporarily waived.

He may ask you to do things that bore you to death, for instance, play "cars" or "heroes" or Monopoly or read the book you must hate to read to her because you've read it to the point of memorizing it. Yes, do it.

The trick here is to pay attention to her, not the game or book. The game or book is just the excuse for being there together. The real purpose is for her to get your genuine, exclusive attention focused on her needs. Faking it won't work.

You can assume that the activities he wants to do, the roles that he chooses for himself and for you, are designed to get to the core of his emotional upset. He may set things up so that he laughs uproariously. Encourage this as long as he laughs. He may physically exert himself pushing against you in an assertive (though not hurtful) way. Permit it, while resisting just enough to allow him to be powerful. He may arrange to bounce off the bed, lightly bump his head and cry. Comfort him, being careful not to turn off the tears by over-comforting and distraction. Maybe say, "It's fine to cry until it stops hurting." He might pretend he's a kitten and you're a mama cat and want to nuzzle and snuggle him. Swallow your fear of getting "too" close, and join in the game.

In all these activities, she's telling you what she needs. You don't have to understand exactly what these needs are; you will meet them if you simply pay attention and follow her lead. Your understanding of her needs will become more empathic over time as you observe, pay attention and respond to her during Special Playtime. Special Playtime is advanced empathy training for parents.

Much of the difficult behavior you now see should dissipate over time. He will engage in less "attention getting behavior" because he will be getting some of the attention he needs in his Special Playtime, and directing that attention to exactly areas in which he has tension.

Don't be tempted to hold her special Playtime hostage, contingent on her good behavior. Schedule them ahead of time and have them on schedule, even if—especially if—she has broken every rule in the house and been completely obnoxious around you. Remember that behavior is a message to you that things are not OK with her.

Begin with one Special Playtime a week, and gradually move up to two, three or even more. Every day would be ideal. You'll need to be realistic about the scheduling. As you see how

effective you can be in providing him with the attention he needs, and how the problems you two are having become more manageable, you will want to schedule more times.

Soon, when she's had a hard day at school or someone important to her has hurt her, she may begin to ask you for Special Playtime to address some of the needs and feelings that the distressing experience has brought up. Or she may understand that you will be available at the next scheduled time, and she can wait until then.

Special Playtime often has an interesting side effect for the parent. Parenting, with or without Special Playtime, often brings to the surface feeling of loss, fear, embarrassment and frustration. Parenting sometimes feels so challenging because of the frequent reminders of our own early difficulties.

Your own feelings may intensify as you attempt to give your child your undivided attention in Special Playtimes. You may get bored, frustrated, confused, impatient with not being in control, angry or sad that nobody ever played with you like this when you were little, or cared enough to try this hard to understand you, or showed you the delight that you are showering on your child. In addition, the exhaustion you may feel is probably more emotional than physical.

Fight these feelings back for these 20 minutes of Special Playtime, and save them until you can see a counselor and address your own unresolved needs. It is critical that you take good care of yourself, too. You won't be able to continue Special Playtimes for long if you become overwhelmed by feelings. Without your attention, Special Playtimes will not work.

Although most parents can apply this approach independently or with some assistance, some cannot. If a child's basic physical needs aren't being met because of parental drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness, or sexual, physical, or emotional abuse of the child by the parent or others; if the parents are lost in their own distress and unable to think about the child; if the parent is just not interested in assuming a counselor role with the child; or if, for any other reason, setting up Special Playtime is unduly difficult, this approach is inappropriate. Seeking professional help may be the best choice in these situations, until these problems are rectified.

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