

# Declarations of Independence

KIDS DON'T ALWAYS NEED YOU TO PLAY WITH THEM

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“See, that dad is doing it right,” my mom remarked as we hung out at the playground with my toddler son.

I instinctively rolled my eyes; my mom and I have had enough parenting conversations for me to know they sometimes don't end well.

When I looked up, I saw the dad in question, relaxing on a bench while his school-age daughter skipped from the slide to the swing, singing to herself along the way. “Parents today need to learn how to just leave their kids alone and let them play by themselves,” my mom declared.

It took a moment for my head to stop spinning. “Finally, a parenting technique we can agree on!”

The importance of independent play for children of all ages cannot be overstated. Play that is child-developed and child-directed is a powerful spark for creativity and problem-solving. But it requires a certain self-discipline to give kids the space they need to engage those inner resources. Only when mom isn't hovering too close can kids figure out things themselves.

Stepping aside, however, can be difficult. Often the implied message to our generation of parents is that it's our job to constantly stimulate, play with and entertain our children. If we don't, we're bad parents (the ultimate insult). Of course, we don't want to be bad parents, so we play catch until our arms are sore or hide and seek until we want to disappear.

Because that's what good parents do.

Or not. A study published in *Parenting: Science and Practice* found that when moms continually direct their young children's play — “No, little Jordan, the cow goes in the barn, not the school-bus” — instead of allowing children to play however they want, kids display less engagement with the games and more negativity towards their moms.

Of course, the antithesis of this also exists in today's parenting universe — parents who are so distracted by cell phones or other activities of daily life that they barely tune in when their children speak to them, much less when they are asked to play. But that's another story. We're talking here about parents who are so lovingly focused on their children that hardly a waking moment passes without interaction of some kind.

There has to be a balance. Allowing your child to play independently means resisting the urge to explain why Mr. Whiskers isn't the most logical name for a toy puppy, or why you can't fly a pirate ship to the moon. Research shows that holding your tongue leads to a happier, more confident and creative child.

There should be limits to independent play, of course, particularly for safety reasons. I'm not talking about turning your back while little Julia climbs on top of the kitchen cabinets or dashes across the street. The point is simply that there is real value in giving children more autonomy in their play, in setting perimeters around their activities rather than calling the shots.

## Giving Kids Freedom

Parents have to work at encouraging independent play. Here are some things every child needs:

**SILENCE.** Turn off the television. Sit together, but slow the conversation down. When you reduce sound stimulation, you give children a chance to be in their own headspace to think and imagine.

**SPACE.** Whether it is in their bedroom, the living room, or some other corner of your house, give kids the space to create a mess. Don't put toys away while they are still playing, just to reduce cleanup later. Don't even put them away after they are done. They may want to resume their play in their magical world, and you will have destroyed it.

**FREEDOM.** It is in most parents' nature to be dominant. For a change, give your child the freedom to call the shots, whether he wants to play alone, with siblings (or without), and even whether you are welcome to join in the game. Follow his directions, adopt his rules, embrace his vision.

**MATERIALS.** Provide items that don't tell children how they are supposed to be used. Empty boxes can become a train, a space station, a zoo — anything your child can imagine. Old sheets and blankets are the perfect makings of a tent, playroom fort, or a stage curtain. Art materials, toy figures and even plastic kitchen items encourage open-ended play and creativity.

— Kiki Bochi

Watching a young child play independently is absolutely fascinating. One of my greatest joys is witnessing my boy explore on his own. Last night he spent a good 30 minutes playing with a simple paper plate. Yes, he can get frustrated when he can't figure out how to do something, but then he is absolutely tickled when he gets it. He makes himself laugh, and sometimes he even dances solo to the music in his head.

Sometimes I get up and start dancing too. But sometimes I remain still — just like that dad on the bench at the playground — and simply enjoy the view of my son doing his own thing.

As mom Katie Markey McLaughlin develops her own style of parenting, she makes sure her son experiences more freedom.



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