

Tips from an expert

REGISTERED BACP Counsellor and Founder of Birth and Beyond Sarah Wheatley outlines why playing with your children is so important.

What are the benefits of playing with children from an early age? The benefits of playing with children from an early age are difficult to quantify, there are so many! They can roughly be divided into the benefits for the parent, the benefits for the child and the benefits for society. The benefits for the parent involve a greater sense of enjoyment of their new role as a parent, and more resilience when things are hard. The benefits for the baby are that they are being given the building blocks for emotional, mental and physical wellbeing as they grow up. And the benefit for society is that playing with children from an early age leads to a happier, healthier population.

What are the benefits of talking with children from an early age? Talking with babies can give parents a sense that they are interacting with someone, rather than just looking after a living 'doll.' Even if the child is too young to respond verbally, babies like to hear their parents' voices and can recognise the sound of their parents' voices as soon as they are born. So when parents talk to their children, this just increases the bonding process that has already begun, and paves the way for communication in the future.

What are the benefits of reading with children from an early age? Reading provides a really wonderful opportunity for you both to focus on something and develop your curiosity together. As well as looking at the book itself, the physical act of reading provides opportunities for cuddles and closeness. All these things promote bonding and help create

a secure attachment with your child.

How easily can playing, talking and reading fit into everyday lives?

Parents often think that they need to set aside time to do special 'activities' with their children, but often they can be woven into the fabric of whatever you are already doing. Parents can chat to their babies whilst hanging up washing. A walk in the buggy is

an opportunity to point out things that your child might like to look at, sing nursery rhymes or even play a counting game. Many parents talk about how they sing to their babies whilst in the shower, allowing the parent to get on with what they need to do, and also interacting with their child.

What advice would you give to parents on playing, talking and reading with their little one?

It can feel daunting thinking that you have to come up with more activities to play with your child, as well as all the other things you have to do as a parent, and you wouldn't be the first parent who worried about not spending enough 'quality' time with your child.

Children do need some time where your attention is focussed solely on them, but research shows that this doesn't need to be all the time for a secure attachment to form. Interacting with your child during your daily activities creates an ongoing habit of communication that will continue as your child develops.

Have you any top tips for new parents/carers?

Watch and listen to what other parents do with their children, and if there's an idea that might suit you and your child, nab it! Try some of the ideas for play-

ing with your child that you read about or see on TV. You might feel a bit self-conscious at first, but as your child responds to you, you will soon relax.

Don't worry about 'getting it wrong.' If your child doesn't like whatever you're doing, you can stop. Congratulations, you've just learnt something new about your child.

What do you think of PlayTalkRead?

I think that Play Talk Read has a great ethos of encouraging parents to interact with their children as much as possible, as early as possible, in a way that everyone can enjoy and manage. Each parent-child relationship is a unique dynamic, and finding ways of playing, talking and reading together might take a bit of practice. Having resources like PlayTalkRead available can help provide ideas and encouragement whilst parents become more and more confident in their way of interacting with their child.