



4 Ways Play Can Help Boost Your Child's Mood

Everyone feels stressed or down sometimes, including kids. Play (</English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/default.aspx>) is a great way to help them feel better. Beyond providing a fun distraction, play can help children get in touch with their feelings. Play is a powerful way to get inside your child's mind a bit and give them a sense of control and mastery over life. In fact, play therapy is one of the treatment (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/depression-in-children-and-teens-treatment-options.aspx>) tools used by behavioral health experts when they work with children.

Read on for a few ways play can help you boost your child's mood at home.

1. Let kids lead the way in play



One of the things parents tend to do when their kids get grumpy or defiant is to micro-manage more. But part of a young child's normal emotional development (</English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Emotional-Development-2-Year-Olds.aspx>), especially by about age 2, is struggling to gain more control their actions, impulses, feelings and their body. This can become frustrating for them at times.

Play, on the other hand, lets your child feel more in control. You can just sit back and observe. Turn off digital distractions, bring out whatever your child is in the mood to play with (crayons, blocks, action figures, whatever!) and don't direct the play. It's ok to ask questions, or say things like, "Oh that's cool!" or "What can I draw?" but try to notice when you want to jump in and control things, and resist that urge.

2. Focus on bringing out the smiles

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One of the best things about play is the natural joy that can come from being silly together, popping bubbles, chasing and tickling or telling jokes. You don't need to demand that your child join you—you can start without them and let them choose to join in (this way, they feel in more control). Studies show that playing in "synchrony" with your kids—such as taking turns blowing bubbles, dancing to the same songs or doing funny faces in the mirror—is great for their emotional development.

3. Make identifying emotions a game



One activity to try is drawing a grid with 4 zones and a circle in each of them. Then, turn the circles into faces with different emotions. Let your child help you draw the faces, identify the feelings and list a few things that make them feel that way. You can also talk about what they can do to feel better when something makes them feel bad, so they can get back to the happy zone. You can ask questions about how their favorite book (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Books-to-Build-Character-Teach-Important-Values.aspx>) or cartoon characters might be feeling. Emotions don't need to be scary—like Mister Rogers said, we need to teach kids that they are mentionable and manageable.

4. Keep the fun moving

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Physical activity (</English/healthy-living/fitness/StopWatch-Tool/Pages/default.aspx>) can have a powerful effect on mood. Occupational therapists know that stretching the joints, bouncing around, swinging, or other sensory/motor activities can really help kids feel alert and more positive. Look around your yard or neighborhood to see what could make into a daily body-moving routine. Visiting a playground, riding bikes, playing tag or simple activities like jumping rope kicking a ball around are all good options.

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