

CREATING PLAY SANCTUARIES FOR TRUE PLAY

The late neuroscientist Jaak Pankseep argued that children need play sanctuaries to serve their emotional systems. Why? Because true play has become increasingly endangered in a work- and outcome-driven society. The idea that rest brings growth or that freedom from work is a requirement for well-being is denigrated for the sake of getting ahead, achievement, and the pursuit of material goods. While we acknowledge the need for play on one hand, we are concerned our kids will get 'left behind' if we don't make them work at academics, participate in structured activities, or perform.

The word *sanctuary* means a place to protect and preserve something that is sacred. A sanctuary is a haven, oasis, harbour, or shelter, and is meant to provide immunity from external pressures. Just as play doesn't demand time and space, neither will sanctuaries appear on their own. We need to take an active stance in fostering natural reserves in a child's life, so that play doesn't get lost – and emotional maturity and well-being with it.

Play is a spontaneous act and cannot be summoned on command. We need to provide emotional support so that kids can get there and create bounded spaces that provide the freedom to play. Here are two key strategies to do just that:

1/ Focus on relationship

The bias to explore, express, and release oneself to play is activated when a child's relational needs are met. A child is free to play when they don't have to worry about whether their hunger for contact and closeness will be filled. When they can take for granted that an adult will provide for them in a generous and consistent way, separation anxiety will not hijack their attention.

Children under the age of three are largely preoccupied with their attachment needs so play is typically done in short bursts with adults and others nearby. When they become more independent and want to venture out on their own, they are more likely to get 'lost in play' for increasing periods. By the time a child is 5 years of age, they should ideally be able to play for extended periods – on their own and with others.

To foster play, adults can collect a child's attention and engage them for the purpose of connection. This could involve feeding them, talking to them, sharing an interest or activity with them, or telling them the plan for the day. When a child is connected, the adult can then move them towards a space created for play, and retreat when the child's play has taken over. The space could contain anything children are free to express themselves on, from a sheet of paper for colouring, to pots and pans to bang on, to a playground with slides and things to climb on. The best environment is one that allows a child the freedom to explore without being overly prescriptive as to what this should look like, other than ensuring reasonable safety parameters.

2/ Create empty space and embrace boredom

We can set the stage for play by not allowing things that interfere with it to get in the way, such as screens that entertain or provide information, instruction, schooling, and structured activities, and by playing with others where the child is in a passive position. The key is to create a space that is free of work, responsibilities, or performance.

When we do this, all that is left is for children to sit in the empty space that we have created.

When we remove all of the things that distract a child and which create noise around them, it allows them to tune into the noise that is within. Sometimes this is uncomfortable and kids might say "I'm bored", which is really about vulnerably feeling the void that has opened up. Instead of seeing boredom as something we need to fix, we need to reframe it as the child's internal world calling them to play. When we allow them to sit in the boredom, the play instinct should take the lead and move them to expression.

For children who are chronically bored and their play instinct doesn't take over in the spaces we create for them, we can lead them into play through our relationship (while also considering why a child is emotionally flat-lining). For example, while doing yard supervision at a school, I noticed a 6-year old standing on his own. I asked him why he wasn't playing and he said he was bored. This became a repetitive story I heard each lunch-time as I checked in with him. One day I told him I had some special fall leaves to show him and that all the kids were playing in them. He still wasn't interested but followed me to have a look. With some playful prompts from me, he followed as I marched through the leaves and copied as I threw them into the air. While he could not initiate play on his own, he could be drawn into play through relationship.

Carl Jung wrote, "The creation of something is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct." Human development is one of those creations and won't be achieved by thinking our way into maturity, but rather by playing our way there. We need to create play sanctuaries to protect this invisible force that lies waiting and dormant inside of us. We also need the courage to release our kids and ourselves to play, and to let it carry our hearts when they are hurting the most. •



© Can Stock Photo / YakobchukOlena