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7 Principles for Using Play to Support Newcomer Children



Play can be a powerful tool for making spaces feel safer and more welcoming to children. Creating a **safe space** is especially crucial when working with newcomer children, who experience the stresses of displacement and resettlement. Those working with this population, from therapists to caseworkers, can use play to help children understand complicated processes and build trust while talking about difficult subjects. If you have decided to incorporate play into your programs and services, the wide variety of techniques can feel intimidating at first, so you may be nervous or unsure where to start. This tip sheet offers seven principles for incorporating play into your work with newcomer children and describes what "good" play looks like.

1. Create Rituals Using Play

How a child **enters and leaves** a space is important and can make your time together special. Rituals around the start and end of a session can also lessen a child's anxiety around meetings because they can anticipate what will happen. For example, you can begin sessions by playing a game or listening to music together, and you can end by gathering all the toys and games you've used. Predictability can also help children **transition into what they will do next**. For example, in a clinical setting, if a child knows every session ends by building blocks together, they can gain closure, regulate themselves, and prepare for what comes next (like going back to school).

2. Focus on Choices, Not Instructions

Children are often not allowed to make choices for themselves. Make your time with them different. Instead of telling children what to do during play (such as how to draw or the "right" way to use a toy), **let them choose what is right for them, and be judgment free**. Let them know that during your time together, they have agency in their approach to play.

3. Mirror Energy and Reactions

Follow the child's lead. If a child comes into a meeting feeling excited, be excited with them. But if they are uncertain or feeling sad, that is okay too. Your role is not to tell them what to feel or to entertain them. Meet them where they are and respect the energy they bring to the interaction.

4. Collaborate in Play

Play should be collaborative and allow you to **meet the child at their level.** Collaborating in play builds trust and a sense that you are on the same team. Whenever possible, involve yourself in the play. If the child wants to build with blocks, build with them. By joining in the play, you implicitly give

children permission to play freely. For example, if you are a caseworker on a home visit, you might ask how the children like to play (such as sports or coloring) and play along during your visit.

5. Do Not Use Play as a Pretext

Many professionals working with children will often use play as a way to "hide the medicine" (for instance, "I need to have a difficult discussion with this child later on, so we're going to do some coloring beforehand."). While there is no doubt that play can help make some difficult experiences easier, this misses the point that **play itself is a critical part of supporting a child's needs**. Play creates agency, a sense of safety, and is crucial for children's well-being and development.



IRC legal assistant Emma Poole with "Lola," a stuffed cow used by IRC staff.

6. Treat Play as a Process

Play is not a switch you can flip to magically make children talk to you or instantly feel safe. Using play means committing to a process of continually providing agency and communicating safety. **Play is ultimately about relationships**: it is about showing that you can be trusted and that you are invested in a cooperative process with the child.

7. Remember that Any Invitation to Play is Meaningful

Using play can be intimidating, and a lot of the tools and techniques take time to fully master. You do not have to be an expert puppeteer or a classically trained artist to begin using these tools or for their impact to be meaningful. **Any invitation you give to a child to participate in a state of play is a communication of safety and trust.** Even if a child does not want to engage in play, the invitation itself is meaningful. It shows the child that you are committed to meeting them at their level and to designing your work around what makes them feel safe.

Curious about using play in your work? Here are some additional resources:

- Right to Play's Literature Review: Examining the Evidence Base for Play and Psychosocial Well-being in Crisis Contexts
- USCRI's Strategies and Activities to Support Refugee Youth Engagement and Resilience: guidebook for working with children and families, includes activities for practitioners
- MHPSS's Children and Families Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Resource Collection: library of resources for supporting children and families
- International Rescue Committee (IRC) Play Program: Contact Play@Rescue.org to learn

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