# the power of part-child

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# chapter 1

# The Variety of Ways to Play

It's so easy to miss out on joyful, rewarding playtimes with children when they're small, a time we can't recapture. You can play with your children in so many fun ways—perhaps more than you realize.

gh. What a disaster area. Dirty dishes, cereal boxes, and piles of papers. And cleaning the kitchen wasn't the only to-do item on my list. Let's see, balance checkbook, call my son's elementary school teacher . . .

"Mommy, come play with me." Four-year-old, three-foot-high Aimee pulled on my shirt.

"Oh, honey, I can't right now. Just look at this mess."

"Pleeeze?" Her high, squeaky voice edged into the whiny zone.

"Okay, okay. Um, how about if I set the oven timer for fifteen minutes from now. When it buzzes, I'll take a little coffee break with you, okay?"

I cleaned like a maniac, yet when the buzzer rang it was hard to stop. "Just one more counter to wipe, honey, and oh, let me put these bills away. Uh-oh. Is that one due already?"

"Mom, you promised."

Choosing between being an unkempt housekeeper or a promise-breaking mom, I opted for the former. But I set the timer again for ten more minutes. Let the buzzer be the bad guy, making me go back to work.

I sat on Aimee's carpet, mug in my hand. She said, ohso-proudly, "I made you lunch!" and served me a plastic

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apple and a hot dog on a pink plastic dish. (No one told me when I became a mother how much plastic food I would eventually eat.)

"Mmmm, this is delicious," I said, while thinking, *Oops, I've got to return Gordy's shirt. . . . I wonder where the receipt went?* I nearly jumped to my feet to look for it. Then I remembered I was supposed to be playing.

"Here, Mommy, here's a cookie. I just baked it!" Aimee opened my palm and pretended to set something in it.

"Ohhh," I said. "A pretend one?"

"No," she said. "Not pretend, imaginary."

What? She finally had my attention. "Uh, what's the difference between pretend and imaginary?"

Aimee rolled her blue eyes a bit impatiently. Then her words rushed out: "Mom, you know. Pretend is when we say something is real, when it's not. Imaginary is when you can't, it's when you can't..." (she took a breath) "see it, but you say it's real." I smiled at the way she stuttered entire phrases in her eagerness to express herself, a little like tripping when you run too fast in flip-flops. Then it hit me.

"Oh! You mean the invisible cookie you just put in my hand is imaginary. But the plastic hot dog is pretend?"

She nodded.

Wow, I thought. I've never once thought of pretend and imaginary as having different meanings. Do they really? Did she hear that somewhere or come to that conclusion on her own? Fascinating.

Aimee poked at my empty palm. "See the green and red sprinkles on it?"

Suddenly her imagination took over mine. I could almost *see* those sprinkles. I became mesmerized by the way she pronounced her words, the way her long eyelashes batted gently. Suddenly all I could see and hear was my Aimee. Love for her overwhelmed me. My heart hurt, a genuine pain squeezing my breast, at the realization she would be four for so short a time.

Suddenly she jumped on me and hugged me. "Mommy, I love you so so so much."

Bzzzzzzzzz. Darn that buzzer.

Years later, recalling that moment still chokes me up. Aimee, now eleven, paints her toenails blue and peppers her sentences with "like," as in, "You know, like, that guy, who was, like, on that show?" She still giggles when I tickle her. But instead of offering me plastic food, she's becoming more like her brother, whose idea of parent-child play is having Mom drive him to the mall.

Connecting with your child, even in short ten-minute bursts, is what helps make parenting so rewarding. But life so often gets in the way. If Aimee hadn't asked me to play that day, I might not have taken the time. And as you can see, even ten minutes can be powerful. I think we, as parents, need frequent reminders to stop and play, lest we miss out on those rewards.

## **DEFINING PLAY**

Quite a few parents have asked me, "What qualifies as play?" as if there were one answer. Does sitting on the floor, coffee cup in hand, simply looking at a child and responding to her thoughts qualify? Absolutely. So do a host of other activities.

One dictionary defines the word playful as "high spirits, gaiety, and humor in action or speech."

Hmmm. Fun seems to be one key element here. Do you have fun with your children? Do they have fun with you? And *how* do you do that? Let's look at intriguing synonyms for play found in *Webster's New World Thesaurus*<sup>2</sup>:

"Cut up, be the life of the party, play the fool, carry on."

Playing the fool may be tough for you if you struggle with spontaneity. Yet it can be learned, and I believe it is worth learning. You don't have to truly be a fool, but you can be willing to look a little silly on occasion in order to connect with others in a fun way. Silliness comes easier if you start with babies. Merely

sticking a shoe on your head makes a baby laugh, because he's learned just enough about the way the world works to know that sneakers make ridiculous hats.

One evening when Tyler was six months old, he was trying so hard to crawl but just couldn't get it. Instead, he flopped about like a fish out of water. So—impulsively—I threw myself to the floor, copying his weird crawling attempts. I asked him, "Is this how you do it?" And that little six-month-old baby began to belly laugh hysterically. He was literally holding his little gut, gasping for air between giggles. Gordy heard his baby's laughter from the other room and insisted that I do the Fish Flop again, in front of him.

Well, as a mother, you can't sink much lower than flopping about on the carpet on your belly. But I was destined for silliness from that point on, doing anything it took to get a giggle from a child—a lovely, musical sound. And yes, my husband still respects me.

The synonyms for fun continue:

"To amuse oneself, make merry, play games, rejoice, have a good time, horse around."

A game can be as simple as peekaboo with a baby, or as complex as a game of Risk or Monopoly with a teenager. But don't think that the word *games* must mean baby games, table or card games, or even the use of toys or crafts.

Some of my kids' favorite games require about a minute and revolve entirely around mundane chores—vacuuming, for instance. As I mow the carpet, my Vacuum Monster says, "Growl, growl, I am so hungry today; some little girls would be mighty tasty!" Then occasionally—without warning—I chase giggly preschoolers with the vacuum. They shriek delightedly, jumping up on the furniture. If the monster loses interest, the girls beg to be eaten again.

Another favorite, for little people as well as big people, usually occurs when my family is lazily lying around watching TV. I suddenly yell out, "Warm Laundry Alert!" and as they respond, "Oohh, me! Me!" I sprinkle warm T-shirts over them, fresh from the dryer.

As for horsing around, many dads identify with *that* definition of play. My husband's idea of tucking the kids in bed is jumping on them and wrestling with them. It's not highly conducive to sleep (ahem!) yet definitely conducive to giggles. Our friend Chuck makes kids into pillow sandwiches. He smashes a kid between two slices of bread (the pillows) after spreading on the condiments, a process which usually tickles.

"To frisk, cavort, dance, romp, frolic, skip, caper."

Many of my own family's favorite ways to play involve music: slow dancing with an infant, swing dancing with a four-year-old, rapping with a teen—just enough to make him grimace. I'm grateful for twenty-five years of marriage to a man who loves a wide variety of music: classical, jazz, scat, gospel, rock, and ethnic. He's my resident disc jockey.

One evening, while listening to music as we ate dinner, Gordy leapt from his seat, midbite. Turning up the stereo, he began conducting with a fork. Aimee and I left the table to jitterbug. Tyler donned dark glasses and lip-synched into a carrot. Five minutes later we were back to eating—but that little bit of goofiness had pulled our family together.

Even when we're immobilized by seat belts in the car, if the tunes are catchy enough, we revert to head dancing and discostyle finger-pointing. Sometimes I'll turn my kids' heads, arms, and legs into a drum set to keep the beat. Mixed with silly play are also tender moments, including dedicating songs to each other. Who can resist a six-foot-one mustached bodybuilder who lipsynchs to his fourth-grade daughter, "I'll be there, for better or worse, 'til death do us part, I love you with every beat of my heart." Okay, put away the hanky and let's move on.

Here are a few more play definitions:

"Recreate, liberty, action" (hike or swim); "act in a play: impersonate" (eat imaginary cookies and play with

puppets); and "engage in a sport: participate, engage, rival, compete" (play tennis or shoot hoops).

What a variety of ways there are to play! Play activities generally seem to fall into these categories (you may think of more):

- Silly, spontaneous, one-to-one play and silly family play
- Socused play: games, projects, playing with toys in a constructive way
- Socused family outings: to the zoo, library, sports activities, etc.
- Family vacations
- Solution Calming, cuddly activities: reading, massage

By ridding yourself of preconceived notions about "real" play, you've already taken the first step toward eliminating barriers to play. Some parents feel guilty about never doing craft projects with their kids. Don't good parents do that? Not necessarily. Some prefer the great outdoors; others would rather snuggle in a rocking chair, reading *Winnie-The-Pooh*. Your own interests and style will cause you to play in your unique way.

Of course, it is healthy to stretch yourself occasionally. It may require more discipline for you to arrange a play date that's fun for your child yet less fun for you. If she loves arts and crafts and you hate them, making a project together can be a lovely gift to your child. You might not have fun completing the project, but you will find joy as you watch your child reach mental or motor milestones in the course of play.

What if your child's interests turn you off? By participating in these activities occasionally, you may find your own interest stimulated after all. I experienced this when Tyler was young. He had a penchant for collecting little black salamanders from a nearby creek. Ugh. Slimy little things. I truly disliked them.

However, as we learned more about them from library books and observed one as a pet, I gradually caught Tyler's interest. When Tyler was at school, I actually found myself surreptitiously visiting "Sally" in the aquarium in the laundry room and crooning at the little black thing. When Sally was sent to an untimely death as a result of its home being shaken from the gyrating washing machine, I was actually a little sad.

We have lasting memories of Sally, however: photos of the salamander crawling through a Lego maze, and a home video that still makes us laugh. In the video, three-year-old Aimee is exuberantly petting the creature, confidently describing how Sally loves to eat pancakes with syrup and play with her dolls. "Wookit his gween teef," (teeth!?) she exclaims, then she chatters on, absentmindedly stroking—no, stretching—the salamander's legs.

She suddenly pauses—at the precise moment we planned to intervene to prevent loss of limb—looks adoringly at Sally, squeals, "Awww!" and *kisses* that slimy creature smack on the lips! (Eeuew!)

Okay, so you never considered videotaping a child kissing an amphibian as play. But we had fun taping it, unexpected as it was, and it made for a hilarious family memory. Any activity that connects you with your kids in an intimate way, or helps you learn more about your children—and they about you—qualifies as play.

You might think that moment with the salamander just *hap-pened*—that you can't possibly plan such a thing, nor would you necessarily want to! True. But by being open to a potentially funny moment, in the spirit of playfulness, we stopped what we were doing to sprint for the camcorder and pay attention to our daughter. Otherwise we would not have caught "the kiss."

Many times since then, we have watched that tape and laughed together as a family. What a lot of play value for just a few minutes of spontaneous filming!

# DOES JUST BEING TOGETHER COUNT AS PLAY?

You may spend a whole day doing kid-related things: chauffeuring children to gymnastics or swimming lessons, doing chores to-

gether, even riding in the car on a family vacation. But does any of that qualify as play?

The way you connect during those times may not be conducive to much intimacy and fun. "Hurry, you'll be late for your lesson! What? You can't find your swimsuit? Oh, no, rush-hour traffic is building!" "Yes, you have to clean your room, and I'm tired of nagging you about it." "Hey! Your dad can't drive with you all squabbling in the backseat!" What kind of fun is that?

With a little thought and planning, you can use driving time as a way to connect with your kids, although it helps if you're not the one with your eyes on the road.

Does watching children practice, perform, or compete count as play? I'll leave that up to you. That kind of support is extremely meaningful to kids. The image of Mom or Dad in the stands, cheering them on, often creates warm, lasting memories (as parents' absence can create painful ones). But being on the sideline can't entirely replace one-on-one, close contact and conversation. Sideby-side time needs to be balanced with face-to-face time.

# COACH, CHEERLEADER, OR SPECTATOR?

What should be our role when we play with our children? As we play, should we tell them what to do, provide words of encouragement, or simply observe, smile, and nod? Is there a "right" way to play with kids—a best way to interact with them?

Arthur Kraft, Ph.D., expert in child psychology, writes about how parents can use creative play to bridge communication gaps with kids.<sup>4</sup> In an informal study, he asked the parents of children he was treating (for anger, anxiety, etc.) to commit to regular, systematic play sessions at home with their children. The parents then met with Kraft weekly, as a group, to describe what had transpired during their play sessions at home with their children. The parents discussed difficult behaviors and puzzling comments that had cropped up in the course of play. They described how they had responded and asked the psychologist what they could have said or done differently.

We can learn valuable techniques from experts to help troubled kids. Kraft's recommended play sessions did effectively improve his little clients' mental health. But I can't help but wonder: Was it because the parents learned to respond to their kids in prescribed ways? Or were the parent-child play sessions successful primarily because the kids were suddenly getting regularly scheduled, concentrated, one-on-one attention? There is tremendous power in setting aside focused time to be with our kids. That alone sends them a positive message: I want to be with you!

# DON'T WORRY ABOUT HOW YOU PLAY

If you have a loving, positive relationship with an emotionally healthy child, please don't worry about using just the right words or actions as you play together. A loving gaze, a warm smile, and attentiveness to your child will make up for many faux pas.

Oops, so you grabbed the scissors too soon, thinking that would help your child. Or you made a suggestion he interpreted as criticism. Suddenly he's having a meltdown. Stuff happens. As long as you avoid hurtful comments and make a genuine effort to show interest in your child, you're likely to find him forgiving of your imperfections.

Do you wonder if it's okay to share your own opinions and feelings about play when you're together? Some believe mutual sharing can be healthy, barring unnecessary criticism or burdening a child with adult troubles. Your child wants to get to know you, as you do him. If your child wants to play an activity in a way that you don't find very interesting, it's perfectly acceptable to say so. You might suggest something you both like, or find a new, fun way to adapt a game he wants to play. (See the tips on pages 147–148 for making Candy Land more fun.)

The more you let your child lead, however, the more you'll learn about the way he thinks. Try not to direct him too much. In fact, there's great freedom in knowing you don't have to make all the decisions. You might be amazed at what a small child will

dream up if you just sit or lie still and say, "Let's play!" Don't underestimate your own expertise, knowledge, and understanding of your child. At any given moment, you might be coach, cheerleader, spectator, or a combination of all three! As you can see, there is no particular "right" way to play.

But there *are* common barriers to meaningful playtimes—barriers that cause you to avoid play to begin with or keep you from enjoying play when you do make the effort. In the next chapter, we'll discuss some of the things that get in the way.

# minute

### THE UM GAME

This "game" began one day when four-year-old Elisa asked, "Mom, can I have a sandwich with, um, with . . . you know! Um . . . "

"I'm sorry," I replied, very seriously. "We're fresh out of um today!"

"Oh, Mom!" (giggle) "I want some, um . . . "

"We could get some um tomorrow. But it's rather expensive . . ." (Giggle) "Mommy!"

After establishing that it was peanut butter she wanted, and once she was eating, Elisa said, "Now you say um, Mom!"

"Okay. I sure would like to . . . um . . . "

"Sorry, Mom, you did that yesterday!" (giggle)

And so the Um Game was born.