

## Attentive Play

### Being N.E.A.R.R

### **Narrate. Enthusiasm. Attune. Reflect. Regulate.**

Toddler to Tween

Play is considered the language of kids. It's how they make sense of the world and how they experiment with different ways of being in the world.

Attentive play is based on basic play therapy skills combined with our understanding of how our nervous systems work. It's a specific way of interacting with your child for a specific amount of time that helps you speak their language.

For the Attentive play session, your child leads the play. This means your child is in the driver's seat for the entire play session. They choose what to play, how to play, and what your role in the play will be. By giving your child your focused attention, attentive play time helps meet many of your child's thriving needs: connection, attention, fun, joy, and play.

It creates the space that allows your child to share their thoughts and needs with you and for you to show your understanding. When kids feel understood, they feel self-respect, self-worth, and gain confidence. Attentive play practice helps strengthen your relationship and creates a sense of trust, security, and closeness for both of you. In addition, you'll both experience playfulness and feel joy together.

Depending on your parenting style and your beliefs about the parent-child relationship, you may feel uncomfortable allowing your child to lead the play. Please allow yourself to feel uncomfortable while still engaging in Attentive Play.

### **How Long to Play**

Choose a length of time you can most reliably fit into your schedule. You can do one 20-30 minute play session each week. Another option is to play for 5 minutes, 5 -7 days a week. This can be enough to help you feel confident in your skills and to provide the benefits.

If you choose to play for one 20-30 minute session, consider starting with 5 minutes and then increasing by 5 minutes each week until you get to your desired time. This is because some of these skills may be new and initially may be tiring or feel frustrating. Give yourself time to build up your attentive play muscle!

It will take regular practice for you to feel confident in your skills and for you to easily use them in other interactions with your child.

Your child may invite you into their play or may have you be an observer.

Your attention may wander, and that's ok. Notice if your mind has left the room and bring your attention back to your child.

### **Where to Play?**

Most programs that teach similar skills, have the play happen in the house or an office with specific toys. Some kids like to play outside. The Being N.E.A.R.R skills of Attentive Play are universal - you can apply them to wherever you are and to whatever activity your child has chosen.

### **What if I hate the play my child wants me to do?**

How often do we have our kids do something that they find boring or uninteresting? The greatest gift you can give your child is your adoring attention to what interests them. If it absolutely pains you to play the way they want and it's interfering with your ability to be enthusiastic and engaged, then gently suggest something that you're more interested in, or only put out toys that you enjoy too.

### **Choosing Toys**

Generally, the best toys for Attentive Play are imagination toys. Ideally, these toys have more than one way that they can be played with. Examples are dolls, doctor kit, toy phones, animal figures, people figures, blocks, cars, playdough, arts and crafts.

Toys do not need to be new or specifically for this. Depending on you and your kiddo, it doesn't even need to be toys.

It's usually a good idea to stay away from games. Depending on your child's age, they may not know the rules and therefore will create their own. Kids who do know the rules, may change them and create their own. This may create tension in your body; a pull to correct them. Breathe through it! That is not the time to correct them.

There's nothing wrong with them altering the play. It's giving you and them the opportunity to explore what happens when rules change. You can name what it's like (regulate!) and follow their rules. If you can regulate it, then go for it! If you absolutely have to play the games by their rules, then do not use them for Attentive Play.

### **Setting Up Play Time**

Most importantly: Decide when is a good day and time for you. This is a time and day where you are most able to focus on your child. You put your phone away, turn off the tv, and have minimal distractions. Depending on their age, you can set out a blanket and put three toys on it. Or, you can play in their room. Or, you can play outside. Let your child choose the toy to play with.

As best as you're physically able, be at their level, meaning, be on the floor with them, be at their eye level. This creates connection and implies a sense of interest in being with them.

Before the first play session, share with them what you're doing. This helps them know what to expect. You can say, "I learned about a special way that we can play together. It's called '[your name] & [their name] play time.' During this time, you'll be able to play with whatever toys you'd like. I'll be here with you. We'll play for x [what length you've decided] minutes."

For future play times, you can say: "We're going to have [your name] & [their name] play time. You can play with what you would like."

### **Set These Aside**

To help this time be about connection, joy, and fun, there are some common parent behaviors you need to set aside. Or rather, practice setting aside and do your best to correct yourself when they happen. They probably will happen and may even happen a lot as you first start. That's A-OK!

Please **refrain** from these behaviors during Attentive Play:

- Commands. No telling them what to do. Examples are "Let's clean up." "Put the toys away." Notice if you bristle at the thought of this and regulate yourself.
- Reprimands, no punishment during this time.
- Questions; you are going to be making statements. This is a challenging one. Many parents engage with their kids through questions. Questions take over the play, and can put the child in a space of performing, rather than using their own minds.
- Negative judgments, no critical comments about how they are playing or their ideas
- Sharing your interpretations of the play. Example: "You built a pyramid." You may not be right.
- Adding your imagination of the play. This is not the time to show them your creativity.
- Using play time as a reward or punishment. Attentive Play time is not to be used as a reward or taken away as a punishment. This is about your relationship with your child and meeting their needs for connection and attention.

Pause, take a breath, stretch, stand up, check in and move your body. What does it feel like to imagine interacting without those behaviors?

### **Prepare to play**

Before you invite your child to Attentive Play time, do the following:

- Do a body scan, notice if anywhere is tight or needs attention
- Practice conscious breathing, take a couple deep breaths in and out
- Move around a little bit; loosen your body up.

While a goal is to enjoy each other, there may be times when you feel uncomfortable with how they are playing. This is for you to notice and regulate and do your best not to change their play.

Practice regulating so you can respond rather than react; so you can co-regulate rather than add to the dysregulation.

Say nice things to yourself. Be kind as you practice. It's ok if you make mistakes, if your attention wanders, if you add your creativity or take over the play, it's ok. Notice it and go back to being NEARR. Your intention to be with your child is more important than being perfect at these skills.

### **The Practice of Being NEARR**

It is a practice! This means the more you do it, the more comfortable and automatic it will become.

Being NEARR is:

- ★ Narrate
- ★ Enthusiasm/Encourage
- ★ Attune
- ★ Reflect
- ★ Regulate

### **N is for Narrate**

This is a time for you to bring words to your child's play language.

What does a narrator do? They describe the story you're watching. You become a narrator for the story your child is "telling" you. Another way to think about it is to imagine being a sportscaster describing the play on the field to an audience who can't see the game. You are simply describing the action you see your child doing - you are not interpreting it or deciding what it means. As you play, talk a lot! Just like a sportscaster.

A challenge that may happen is you find a desire to use your imagination; or to give a story to their play. This isn't the time for you to share your ideas. Remember, your child is in charge; they are the author of the story. That's part of what makes this play time effective.

You only join in the play if they have invited you. They invite you to play by telling you what they want you to do. If they don't invite you to play and instead have you be an observer of their play, you may experience discomfort and have thoughts of rejection that you'll need to regulate. There is no meaning if they have you observe rather than engage in the play. They may have you do both during the same Attentive Play session.

### **E is for Enthusiasm/Encouragement**

Allow yourself to show expressions of joy, smile, and delight in your child's presence. Lovingly touch them. Our nervous system registers our face, our vocal tone, and our nonverbal movements to determine if someone is a threat. You may need to fix your face to show acceptance - allow

yourself to light up when you're with your child. This helps reduce the chance that they will perceive your tone or expression as a threat.

While it's not ok to make criticisms about how they are playing, it is ok to offer specific praise and encouragement. This is also an opportunity to give them some social skills training. Specific encouragement looks like:

"I like how you used the purple for that house."

"Wow, you were really persistent working on that."

"Thank you for sharing."

### **A is for Attune**

This is the act of listening intently and paying attention to the details of what your child is offering.

Notice how your body and mind are responding to your child's play. Your responses show them that you're present and that you're hearing them. Allow yourself to recognize the mood and emotions your child may be showing.

Be careful to avoid telling your child how they're feeling. You can use "wonder" statements about what you're seeing. For example, "I see your face is smiling, I wonder if you feel happy." Make a statement, not a question.

It may be easier to talk about what attunement is by talking about what it's like when we're not attuned to another or when we are misattuned. For example, see if you can remember a time when you were talking to someone and they didn't respond. At. All. Not an "mmhmm", no head nod, no eye contact, no sounds, nothing. Notice what happens in your body and what your mind tells you when you remember that interaction.

Have you ever had a time when you laughed at what you thought was a joke only to look at the person's face and see they aren't laughing? How quickly do you stop laughing and attune to their emotional state?

### **R is for Reflect**

Reflect means exactly what it sounds like: you're a mirror reflecting back to them their words, their expressions, and their play. You may feel like a parrot - and that means you're doing it right! You say back to them their last sentence or last word. You can copy the sounds they make. To reflect their play, you can state, "I see you coloring. I'm going to color too." You're not taking over their play, you're complimenting them by doing the same thing they are.

### **R is for Regulate**

Regulate is the neuroscience way of saying being aware of your thoughts and emotional experience without being overwhelmed by them. It's very important for you to stay connected to

yourself as you interact with your child during this play time. You can sip cold water during your play time.

When you add regulation to attuning, you're practicing the art of dual attention. You're paying attention to your body sensations and your thoughts and you're paying attention to your child's play and state.

### **Handling Situations**

If your child leaves the play, start playing really enthusiastically with the toys. Sound like you're having a great time. They usually come back.

Aggression in the play: Kids need opportunities to explore the energy in their systems and experiment with different ways of behaving. Sometimes that comes out aggressively or in ways we'd label as mean. Do your best to name your experience so you can regulate it and let them explore through play. You can name it out loud so they can hear you. You can name that you're feeling worried or scared or unsure. We all have different tolerances for aggression. If it gets too much for you, you can redirect them, "I'm not for hitting. You can hit this pillow." "The toys aren't for breaking. You can tear this paper/stomp on the egg carton." "[Child's name] I know you really want to hit right now. Please show me another way."

When to end play: End play if you can't redirect them and they are being destructive or hurting you. "You continued to hit me or break the toys, play time is over for today. We'll play again."

Ignore: aggressive sounds, whiny voices, loud voices, and focus on what they are doing that you approve of.

### **Ending Play**

Make at least one transition statement: "[Child's name], we have x minutes of play time left." You know your child. Choose an amount of time you know they do well with. Maybe your child needs multiple transition warnings. If they want to continue to play, you can let them play, but you leave. If you're having a good time and want to continue to play longer, then definitely do that.