

## ***How to Supervise Play***

*From With Stars in Their Eyes*

There is an ongoing conversation in our society about the right amount and type of adult supervision needed during children's play. As expected in our polarized society, the pendulum has swung from overprotective helicopter parenting to a laissez faire "let them work it out themselves" approach. Neither of these serves the changing needs of the growing child. Instead, we need a developmental perspective to satisfy these needs. As children mature and incorporate our guidance and modeling, we can slowly hand the reins to them. At that point, informed by our loving guidance, they will have better capacity to *work it out themselves*.

Before we look into the specifics of play-supervision, let's touch on the most fundamental aspect. Our children are held within our own heart-resonance and the most impactful way to influence their play is to care for our Self. Once again, we return to the Heart Breathing Meditation. As soon as we are aware that we are probably exhausted and therefore anxious and overwhelmed, we simply allow our consciousness to drift down into the region of the heart.

We feel the breath moving through the heart and become aware that we are subtly being rocked with every breath. This gentle rhythmic movement helps to move us out of the sympathetic nervous system (the excitatory system) and into the parasympathetic system (the calm and quiescent system). In my classroom when the play seems ragged and not coherent, I try to remember to turn *first* toward my own heart, to take the minute and relax, breathe, and smile before I turn to the children. I know it seems like such a small thing to do, and you must wonder how effective it could really be. But if you practice this, you will find it is a firm foundation from which to act. Caring for our own heart is the first step as we move toward caring for our children.

With that in mind, here is an overview of developmental stages, and suggestions:

- Babies need our presence minute by minute; heart resonance, care of physical needs, and play all weave together in hundreds of daily loving interactions.

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Toddlers need to move into their small lives and *explore*; we need to be close at hand. When we have created a safe toddler-proof home, they have more opportunities to explore playfully without hearing "No" or having us hover *too* close. Still, we must be just close enough. Preschoolers begin to have playmates and other small children in their life. Three- and four-year-olds usually need the caregiver to be within visual range and hearing distance, but not ever-present. At this time, you should actually be able to get some work done as they play. In fact, your focus and warm interest in this work will draw them into your heart field of resonance. When you do your work with love, visibly where they can see you, they will then play their games within this field of love you are emanating. *This is the best-kept secret to help children play joyfully: when we happily work close to their play, our happiness is contagious.* Make your work visible and filled with love.

I find active work is best—not paper work, not the phone or computer— while the children play within our view. When my children were very young and happily at play, I would sometimes try to read. Inevitably, the harmony would begin to dissolve and someone would come to me in tears or needing help. It took me a little while to realize that the mental energy of reading actually took me away from them energetically. My mind was off in another world and my sons needed me to be right here and present in the physical moment. The young child has come to Earth to learn about the physical world; they look to us to show them. Try bringing laundry folding close, or bring out any loose buttons or mending. If your kitchen is big enough, bring the children’s game into the kitchen as you cook. Think of what active work needs to be done and then decide how to do it within their view. Maybe you like to knit or to whittle wood? Being at work close by their play gives you an opportunity to begin to guide social skills gently—taking turns, sharing, being patient, using words to express needs. The nugget for us to take home is this: *We can center our Self by breathing slowly through the heart, and offer guidance from this heart space.*

For some children learning social skills can be a bit difficult, depending upon their constitution: A little girl in my class was a wonderful sparky little fireball. She had great play ideas, even though she was just three, and she

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wanted everyone to follow along. As with most three-year-olds, sharing was a challenge for her. Sometimes she cried when my distracting her did not work and in the end sharing was necessary. I would say kindly and with heartfelt conviction, “Sharing makes both our friends and our Self happy.” She would say “Sharing does not make *me* happy.” I knew she was speaking her own truth, for that particular moment. It was the grace of the heart breathing that taught me to say, “It will, though, when you are a little bigger.” And surely enough, as she grew, sharing and other social qualities became second nature.

I often use the quality of the sounds of children’s play as a good indicator to tell me when I need to move close to the play and focus, as well as when I can step away to do my work. As we have mentioned, when cooperation and collaborative play are going well, we can hear a happy hum in the subtle atmosphere. When we hear the quality of sound change, we need to pause and see which direction the play is going.

Sometimes an element of goofiness and hilarity enters: This in itself is utterly delicious and children need this full-bodied laughter. But as you probably know, it is easy for silliness to escalate, until finally someone is crying, or something is broken. When you hear *the sillies* beginning, you can walk closer to the game and perhaps join them in their funniness. After a few minutes you can redirect the play, or decide it is a good time to go outside, or distract by asking for a little help from them.

Sometimes you might hear a sharp note enter or voices raised a bit. Again, this is the moment to walk closer to the play. Three- and four-year-olds are still learning the give and take of social play, so you can be available with guidance. You can offer suggestions; perhaps, “Let’s use our words and tell her you would like to take your turn now.” . . . or, “Oh, I see, you would like to have a baby doll, too. Let’s get another one for you.” You will probably spend several years breathing through your heart and offering calm guidance. But eventually your child will become five years old. These years of quiet guidance will have become firmly incorporated into his being.

**Five- and six-year-olds**, if gently guided as described, will have begun to incorporate many of these principles. They now are beginning to be able to *work it out for themselves*. Now their play can be further away from us, perhaps

upstairs in bedrooms or on the back porch. Now we watch with the eyes in the back of our heads. We have learned to *listen* to the sounds of play for indications that something is needed, to come into balance again. Or we *see* their gestures move from round collaborative ones to angular power-seeking ones.

At this moment, it is good to walk through their play space on an errand, or find a piece of work that needs to be done, whereby you can see and hear them. Before we step in to help negotiate, we listen. Are their own negotiations headed in a good direction? Often, through heart-resonance, our simple presence in the vicinity of the disagreement will help steer them toward discovering a collaborative solution.

If your presence is too subtle and they need more help, now your role is different. At this point, you are not the arbiter; rather, you begin with inquiries. You listen to each one's perspective and then ask, "Hmm...I wonder how both of you can be happy with the game?" At ages three and four, give suggestions for moving past the impasse; they do not have the experience to think of alternatives. At this age, though, you ask *them* to brainstorm ideas. Often children come up with solutions that would never occur to me, but that totally satisfy them. Once in a while, in a situation like this, you may need to say, "I can see how that seems like a good idea to you, but it is not okay with me. Let's keep thinking." Now you step back into your role from an earlier stage and offer more workable solutions.

**Grade-school age children:** As your children grow, they need more distance from you during their play. When hurtful or unfair situations occur, they may not choose to come to you for advice in the moment. But they might share these times with you after the fact. If there has been an unresolved squabble among siblings, you can gather them together to untangle the knot, asking for each one's perspective and helping them perceive misunderstandings. If a situation has occurred with neighbor children or at school, conversation between you and your child can help to uncover the process of events.

Again, untangling the knot and giving the child strategies for handling such things in the future is invaluable.

But how do we maintain inner balance and an even tone when we feel our child has been wronged? It is so easy to overly sympathize with your child.

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Often the child's predicament brings up unresolved difficulties from our own childhood. This sense of non-resolution might evoke high emotion in the parent, which is not usually helpful to the situation. *This is another moment for heart breathing:* first we take care of our Self, and then we are better capable of helping them. Our steadiness of heart-coherence allows us to offer them the wisdom of our heart.

How do we supervise their adventurous and risky play? It takes constant sensitivity to find the balance of risk and safety. This sort of play needs dynamic supervision because these games often change and move location.

We can take a simple walk-through of the game on the way to the garden or to take out trash and do a quick risk assessment. When the play awakens fear in the parents, we need to ask ourselves are the fears reasonable, or are they again reflections of our own childhood fears? We can learn to let go of these fears by observing our child's growing ability to assess risk. We might notice that our child approaches a play situation with great enthusiasm but becomes more cautious as she discovers the risks. If children are allowed to return to the same situation a number of times, we will probably see them persist and work toward mastery, pushing their boundaries little by little. As they learn to trust themselves, we learn to trust both their risk assessment as well as our own. We help them to develop this set of skills just as we help them develop other essential capacities.