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FAMILY

Playtime Is Over!

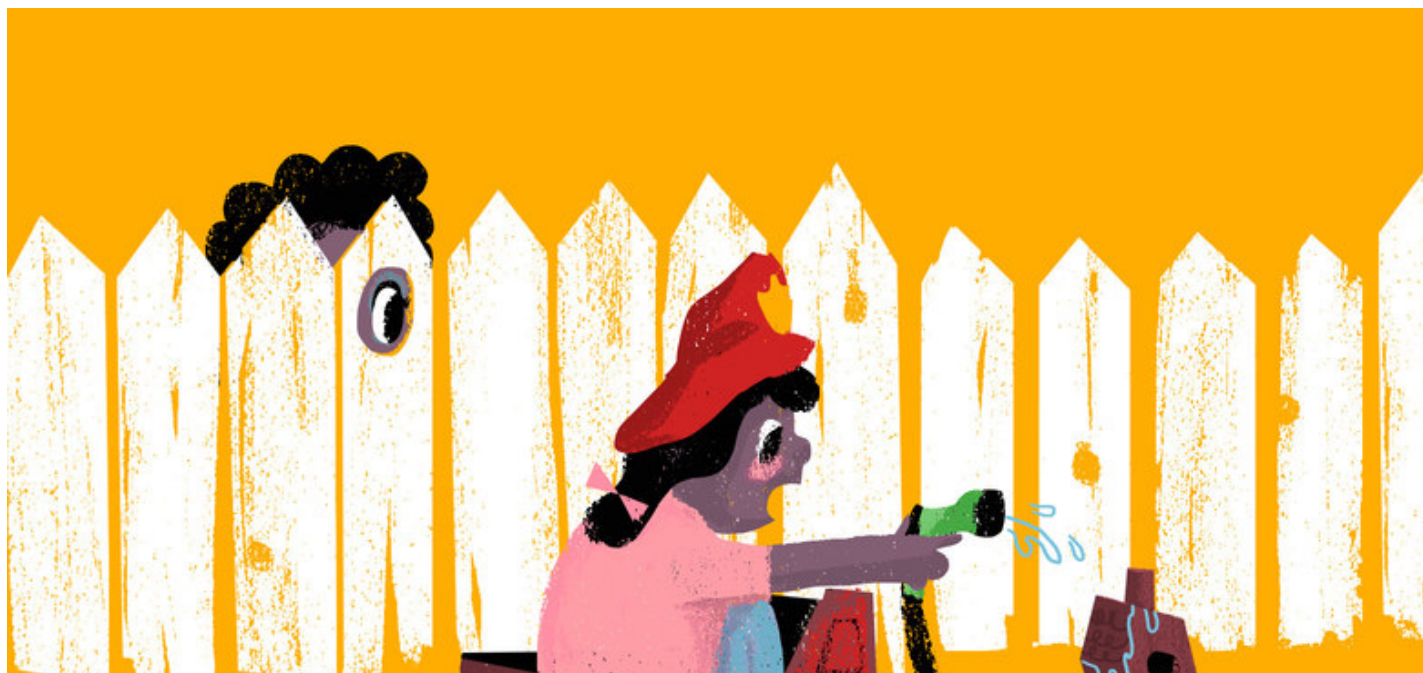
The modern demand to constantly pretend-play with our kids is exhausting. Is there a better way?

By REBECCA ONION
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Natalie Matthews-Ramo

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As a young teenager, I babysat preschoolers. The experience earned me pocket change, taught me a bit about responsibility, and probably delayed my decision to become a mother for a decade or so. I hated being made to play house, made to pretend to give birth to a doll (yup), and made to gallop around like a roaring lion. Play didn't feel fun to me, and the idea of *living* with someone who could draft me into this kind of activity whenever they wanted was horrifying. Cut to the present, where my child is 2 and about to get into the pretend-play phase: She's cradling dolls in her arms, putting them to "sleep" with pats and shushes, and I've been asked to "drink" more than one cup of "poffee" that's actually bathwater. It's adorable now, but I'm afraid of what's looming six months, or a year, down the road: "Play with me, Mommy!"

I'm not alone in harboring some reluctance toward pretend play—and block-building, and crafting, and coloring—nor in feeling like an expectation of play availability is a given of contemporary parenthood. I asked a Facebook group of mothers of young children, located across the country, how they felt about their children's bids to play with them. Most of them reported feelings of failure and inadequacy. "I feel tremendous guilt that I don't want to play with

my kids, at least not in the way they want me to,” wrote a mom of a 5- and 3-year-old. “I am currently 15 weeks pregnant with a sibling whose entire existence is pretty much predicated on the hope that he’ll play with his older brother so that we can go back to having time to ourselves,” wrote another mom of a preschooler. “FINGERS CROSSED OUR PLAN WORKS.”

Meanwhile, editorials like Pamela Paul’s recent New York Times opinion piece beg us to pull back, to allow our children to be “bored”—as if we weren’t *trying*.

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How did so many middle-class American parents get stuck with this guilt? Do our kids really need us to play pretend with them all the time? And if they don't, how do we convince them of that fact? Because there's somebody in this house who wants to play "goggy" (right now), and somebody else who'd rather ... not.

* * *

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Before the turn of the 20th century, most American children had work to do in the home—and so did their parents. But even as leisure time opened up for middle-class Americans, the expectation that a parent participate in play didn't immediately follow. In the 1920s, parenting experts actually told mothers (then the principal target of parenting advice) to stay *away* from their kids' amusements. Ann Hulbert, in her [history of child-rearing advice](#), calls this school of thought the "anti-maternalist style," which was predicated on a belief that "frostiness signaled efficiency."

John Watson's [Psychological Care of Infant and Child](#), published in 1928, famously counseled mothers to stay away from their children's play altogether, because they'd ruin it. "The child is alone putting his blocks together, doing something with his hands, learning how to control his environment," Watson wrote. "The mother comes in. Constructive play ceases. The child crawls its way or runs to the mother, takes hold of her, climbs into her lap, puts his arms around her neck ... Blocks and the rest of the world have lost their pulling power." Watson's prescription for avoiding this kind of parental inference with play is one of the most stunning

paragraphs in American child-rearing advice and deserves to be quoted in full:

If you haven't a nurse and can't leave the child, put it out in the backyard a large part of the day. Build a fence around the yard so that you are sure no harm can come to it. Do this from the time it is born. When the child can crawl, give it a sandpile and be sure to dig some small holes in the yard so it has to crawl in and out of them. Let it learn to overcome difficulties almost from the moment of birth. ... If your heart is too tender and you must watch the child, make yourself a peephole so that you can see it without being seen, or use a periscope.

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If people were ever truly drilling fence peepholes to catch glimpses of their children cavorting (and Hulbert, as well as other historians of child-rearing advice, seriously doubt they were), that “frosty” style was out of fashion by the postwar period. In 1951, Martha Wolfenstein, a child psychologist, wrote an incisive article called “The Emergence of Fun Morality,” which analyzed the contents of government-issued infant-care bulletins over the previous couple of decades.

Wolfenstein detected a sea change: “Fun, from being suspect if not taboo, has tended to become obligatory.”

Wolfenstein saw that the bulletins had altered the way they talked about children’s inherent impulses: “In the early period there is a clear-cut distinction between what the baby ‘needs,’ his legitimate requirements, whatever is essential to his health and well-being, on the one hand, and what the baby ‘wants,’ his illegitimate pleasure strivings, on the other.” The earlier bulletins’ vision of a baby trying to “get” his mother to pick him up and entertain him was replaced, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, with a picture of a child whose desires—including the desire for as much parental interaction as could be provided—were fundamentally sound, and should be followed.

This change in the perception of children’s natures, Wolfenstein realized earlier than most, could mean more pleasure for parents, or it could be a burden. “Play is now to be fused with all the activities of life,” she wrote. “As the mother is urged to make play an aspect of every activity, play assumes a new obligatory quality.” The mother must not only carry out every caretaking activity required of a good mom; she must also bounce and sing as she does it. Wolfenstein wrote, in a perfect summation of America’s all-or-nothing approach to parenting advice: “It seems difficult here for anything to become permissible without becoming compulsory.”

“Parents’ obligation to keep children entertained increased steadily in the 20th century,” historian Peter Stearns writes in his chronicle of the growth of American parental anxiety. Stearns hypothesized that new sources of middle-class parental guilt, stemming from the changing characteristics of American family life, provoked a new feeling that parents were responsible for children’s good time. If a mother (or father, under new expectations for paternal involvement in children’s leisure in the postwar period) was working most of the week; if the parents were getting divorced; if kids now had to go to schools that were eating up their time and making them miserable; if parents didn’t “give” their child a sibling or two; if parents couldn’t provide a house in a neighborhood where it was safe to play outside—if any of these newly common conditions prevailed, middle-class parents felt more and more like they “owed” their children good fun, under whatever terms the children required. Add new messages from advertisers about parental responsibilities for providing toys and educational materials, and new perceptions of threats to children’s minds from “unwholesome” mass media like movies, radio, and comic books, and you have the recipe for late-20th-century (and early-21st-century) anxiety over middle-class American kids’ leisure.

It's worth noting here that the idea that a parent should be a caretaker, educator, and entertainer rolled into one is not only historically, but also culturally specific. "There are lots of cultures where [parent-child play is] considered absolutely inappropriate—a parent would never get down on their knees and play with the children. Playing is something children do, not something adults do," developmental psychologist Angeline Lillard said in an interview. "And that's just fine. There's no requirement for playing."

Differences in practices around parent-child play exist within American subgroups, too. Sociologist Annette Lareau has observed a gap in beliefs about parent-child play between working-class/poor parents and middle-class parents in the United States. Working-class and poor parents in her study held a view that they were responsible for "supervision in custodial matters" (Did the child get to sleep on time? Does the child have sneakers that fit?) and "autonomy in leisure matters," while the middle-class parents engaging in what Lareau termed "concerted cultivation" invested themselves heavily in children's play. Ultimately, the poorer kids, Lareau found, "tended to show more creativity, spontaneity, enjoyment, and initiative in their leisure pastimes than we saw among middle-class children at play in organized activities."

Mr. and Mrs. L. Smith and their younger children in their home on their farm in Carroll County, Georgia.
Jack Delano/Library of Congress

There is some evidence, produced by scientists studying parent-child interactions, that parental playfulness, especially with infants and young toddlers, is beneficial to children's cognition and social relationships. In the midcentury period, researchers found that mothers who were playful with their babies (mimicked their sounds, made funny faces) held their attention longer, and their babies became better at exploring the world. In experimental contexts, mothers who simulated a depressed condition when interacting with their infants—dampened their affect and decreased their responsiveness; in other words, weren't playful at all—increased their babies' negative affect and decreased their responsiveness.

Psychologists Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome Singer, in their 1990 book about play and imagination, described research that found that older children who had parents who told them stories and played fantasy games with them were more imaginative, themselves. “Through play with parents, children learn social communication skills, the value of their own ‘affective displays,’ how to use those signals with their peers, and how to decode the social and affective signals of their peers,” the Singers wrote. Cautioning parents to be careful to “retain a sense of dignity,” the Singers added that “we must remember when to withdraw from the game and allow children their own space to play.”

Brian Sutton-Smith was a lifelong scholar of play. In a 1974 book, *How to Play With Your Children (And When Not To)*, Sutton-Smith and his wife and co-author, Shirley Sutton-Smith, offered age-by-age strategies for facilitating parent-child play, from peek-a-boo with infants to creative writing exercises with 7-year-olds. Yet in 1993, when Sutton-Smith penned an introduction to a volume on the topic of parent-child play, he wrote that he looked back at the couple’s earlier book and thought it was very “optimistic.” “I want to raise the question of whether, despite an apparently modern concern with play and child growth, our efforts aren’t also instigated by our desire to control and socialize children,” he wrote.

Assessing whether he would, after a few decades of research, change the message of *How to Play With Your Children*, he pushed back against those advising playfulness for the sake of “making your kids smarter”: “We favor occasional parent play mainly for the way it increases the competence and vividness of family or peer play relationships rather than for any fairly marginal academic outcomes.” And a parent playing with their kids *could* get it wrong: “The occasional participation with and modeling of play for children seems to have a powerful influence on their own playfulness, unless it is too intrusive, overpowering, or one-sided.”

From the point of view of some people who spend a lot of time with young children, the hallmarks of the kid whose parents over-involved themselves in pretend play are obvious. My sister, Sarah Onion Alford, founder and head of a play-based outdoor preschool serving infants through 5-year-olds in Maine, said that she feels children in her school now lack a facility in group play that used to be more common. She describes superior play, usually attained by the 4- and 5-year-olds at her school, as “the ability to have a lot of fluidity in narrative”—to switch as a group from “pirates” to “astronauts” in a super-quick and unified way, which shows “their ability to listen to one another and contribute new ideas” and “allows their brains to make connections between unrelated things.”

Alford told me she thought parents who played “pretend” with their children too much undermined the development of this fluidity because “adults don’t think that way anymore.” Indeed, the open-endedness and indeterminacy of

children's play was one of the things the mothers I asked cited as "annoying" when contemplating playing with their children: "As a kid I used to like playing pretend but now I'd rather clean the toilet," one wrote. "Give me a board game or something with structure and I'm good. Something meandering with no clear boundaries makes me 😞."

In her own parenting, my sister doesn't play pretend. Her way of being with my nieces when they were small—kind, attentive, and firm; a provider of succor, snacks, and schedule, but not a playmate—was a model that made me feel like maybe I *could* be a mom. I asked her, "But kids love it when we play with them! Don't you feel mean, saying no?" She said, wisely: "They love candy, too. And you can't just let them eat a lot of candy all the time."

* * *

So, how to change your relationship with your child's pretend play? First of all, *don't do it* if you feel annoyed, bitter, or "off" about it. The Sutton-Smiths began their book with the caveat: "You do not have to continue playing night and day. In fact, the ruling principle in this book is, 'If it isn't fun, forget it.'" Say no to play, they wrote, "if you feel like you are intruding, or you feel it is a duty, or you are too grumpy, preoccupied, or just plain exhausted to enjoy the fun you are supposed to be having together." Every contemporary source I consulted, from the people who wanted parents' hands off children's play to the adult-child play cheerleaders, emphasized the idea that you should *not* play if you resent it. "Kids pick up on inauthenticity," Lillard said. "And what a sad message that is, if a child picks up on, 'They don't really want to play with me.'"

But as anyone who's ever been begged to "come, come!" by a toddler knows, not-playing with your kids takes work. You have to figure out how to *be* with them in your house, in a way that's authentic to yourself and nurturing to them, if you're not going to do whatever they want every time they ask. To answer the question of how to be playful-but-not-intrusive, authentic-but-present (which is really a query about how to structure your everyday domestic interactions), we venture away from science and into the realm of parenting advice. Here's what's worked for me, so far.

The RIE style of parenting—a fascinating set of ideas stuck with a truly terrible name, "Resources for Infant Educators"—was inspired by midcentury Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler and popularized in the United States by Magda Gerber. Janet Lansbury's popular blog, Elevating Child Care—you may have seen links to it in your own parenting Facebook group—is probably the best-known exponent of these ideas today. One of the core tenets of RIE is the encouragement of independent play, which believers advocate should begin when the baby is very small. Lie the baby on a blanket, Lansbury counsels, and practice letting her look at the world around her or manipulate simple open-ended toys. Given a completely secure safe space, the baby can be alone for brief periods while you shower or get coffee. Parents are advised to practice leaving for increasingly long stretches of time, so that the baby gets used to the feeling of self-entertaining. (If you're an attachment parent following the baby-wearing, constant-proximity style, this may all seem very cold, but a baby accustomed to lying on a blanket alone gazing at sunbeams for a few minutes becomes a toddler who can build independently with Duplo—or so the theory goes!)

Parents of any age child can adopt another commonly recommended practice: Pour pure attention into them for a period of time, dropping all other activities and doing whatever they want. This sounds onerous at first glance, but is actually really freeing in practice—you put your phone away (everyone agrees this is a must), stop thinking about dinner prep, and just float on the tides of childish whim for a while by seeing what the kid is doing. This observation idea makes intuitive sense to me: I can be a Zen master sitting on the couch, watching my child rearrange her tiny bird figurines at her table and occasionally agreeing that yes, indeed, they are “birdies,” and one of them is blue. I don’t have to start pretend-flying them through the air and make cheeping noises. I’ve never been great at meditating, but this feels good.

The trick to enjoying this child-driven quality time is to try to fade into the background a little bit, energetically speaking. Lawrence Cohen, a psychologist whose book *Playful Parenting* advocates for increased parental attention to play, believes that parents who over-entertain get “exhausted” and “burn out quickly.” If you meet the child on his level and mostly watch what they’re doing instead, it’s still an act of love and attention without being such a draining experience. When you’ve been enlisted in their play, try to intervene as minimally as possible. Suggest fixes instead of fixing problems yourself; don’t redirect what they’re doing, and follow their lead instead.

You can demonstrate, through this practice of observation as well as stage-setting and scheduling, that you think your children's play is interesting, valuable, and good—even if you're not always participating yourself. The Singers' research showed that parents' *attitudes* toward children's creativity—openness, acceptance, encouragement, and the maintenance of time, space, and props to carry out play—could predict children's later levels of imagination. Schedule time for child-driven solo play at home, and try to seize on and expand those moments when your child is happily playing alone. If I see that my toddler is having some nice solo dolly time, I put off non-vital trips outside of the house until she's done with what she's doing, or at least wait until she seems to be at a good stopping point to interrupt her.

Another approach revolves around the theory that toddlers and preschoolers can be brought into your household chores, which provide a different way to be together that can be meaningful to both parties. Angeline Lillard, with her co-authors Jessica Taggart and Megan J. Heise, tested 100 children between ages 3 and 6 to see if they would prefer “real” activities to “pretend” ones. They asked children about activities like talking on a telephone, riding a tractor, fishing, feeding a baby, and cutting vegetables. For most of this list of activities, children chose “real” over “pretend”—showing, in these researchers' view, that Maria Montessori's belief that children would thrive more if provided real-life activities, as opposed to fantasy play, might have been correct.

But how to bring them in? There's an art to it. In Faith Collins' Waldorf-inspired advice book, [Joyful Toddlers and Preschoolers](#), there's a whole section offering very particular advice on how to do household chores with the under-5 set. If you can pull off vacuuming or folding laundry with a child, you can connect with them, increase their sense of competence, and reclaim the parts of the day when your child isn't awake for your own leisure.

Finally, there are probably all kinds of ways you already spend time with your kids that aren't pretend play and aren't onerous to you—maybe they're even pleasurable. Start allowing those to “count” in your mind. “It's really important to snuggle up with your kids and read with them, have a snow day and play board games all morning, or go for walks where you're really talking and really present with each other,” my sister said. None of these things seem like “play,” in the “down on the rug” sense, but they're all driven by togetherness—and it's that feeling of happy ease that matters most. 📌

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