

FACT SHEET



*Proudly promoting
the value of play
and supporting
all Australians
to play every day*

Children, Play and Crisis

A guide for parents and carers

Why play is important for your child

During times of crisis, like you and your family are currently experiencing, play provides an important and extremely valuable role in supporting your child to:

- process their emotions and feelings about the events
- lower their stress levels
- have an opportunity to feel in control of something
- relax

How play helps your child cope with crisis

- When children play their brains release dopamine. This is one of eight neurotransmitters that help the body and brain to function effectively. The effect of dopamine creates feelings of joy and pleasure. When children receive a regular dose of dopamine, they have increased wellbeing, motivation, focus and adaptability.
- When children engage in rough and tumble play or physical activity, such as chasings and ball games, their brain releases a hormone commonly known as BDNF. This hormone not only promotes brain growth, but most importantly helps reduce cortisol in the brain. Cortisol is a stress hormone, and in times of crisis, all our brains have excess amounts of cortisol. Long term exposure to cortisol is not good for developing brains, so encouraging physical activity and active play at this time is a great antidote.
- There will be many conflicting emotions and feelings that arise from this experience. Children will absorb the feelings and concerns of others, particularly adults who care for them, so having a way to express or act out those feelings and problem solve is important. Fantasy play is one way children make sense of what is happening.
- Do not be surprised if through play your children replay scenes or events from your recent traumatic experience. This is normal and a healthy way to process what has happened.

Remember, at any time, if you are concerned about something you witness in your child's play behaviour, speak to a counsellor and seek specialist advice.

Here are 5 easy ways to support your child to play at this time

1/ Look for moments of humour and nonsense in everyday events and in your interactions. Sometimes it is hard to find time for a set play period when you are managing a crisis, but moments of playfulness can also be very beneficial for children. Things like silly names, funny jokes or movements and little surprises, can all be playful moments that bring joy.

2/ Practice “What if?” moments to bring playful thoughts, imagination and joyful interactions into your relationship with your child.

Try these “What if...” moments:

What if ...the water was chocolate? What would you do?

...the rain was not water but cats and dogs? What would we do with all those cats and dogs?

...you had a boat, where would you go?

3/ Allow your child to have access to a lot of different items, like disused household items, old packaging foam, cardboard, boxes and any other items you have available. We call these ‘loose parts’. These items are especially good for supporting play. Imagination can turn these simple items into anything your child desires and create new ways of engaging with play. When ‘loose parts’ play happens, the part of a child’s brain responsible for problem solving gets a great workout!

4/ Let your child, either alone or with friends, create a space for their play. This may be as simple as a blanket in a corner, or a small cubby made from a table and a sheet, or perhaps a large box. Allowing children to create a space of their own where they can retreat to and indulge in play, is an important step in them reclaiming some power and control over their environment.

5/ Number 5 ... and perhaps the simplest of them all! Give your child permission to play! Sometimes in the midst of all this hurt and anguish that children witness, they may not think they should play or feel you would not approve. As a supportive adult, encourage them to play and let them know play is still important for them to participate in and it is still okay to have fun..... and don’t forget, play is good for you too!

A final note to parents and carers

If your child is NOT playing, do seek specialist support and advice.

Only a child who is unwell, physically or mentally, does not instinctively play.

Play is an important part of human biology.

We wish you well in the days ahead.

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