

Supporting Independent Play



During this very stressful time, it is helpful to remember that we all have the capacity to play.

Supporting your child's independent play can lead to a sense of possibility and a decrease in stress. To support your child in playing independently at home, here are some tips and tricks:

- ❖ Prepare the environment to support your child's independence so that your child can make choices for herself, think for herself, and take action on her own.
 - ❖ Arrange a small corner of the house where your child has access to toys and learning materials at any point in the day. Giving your child a sense of ownership of a small part of the household will empower your child to play independently in his own space.
 - ❖ Keeping activities self-contained in one tray or container helps your child to clean up independently. Limit the number of items and keep the rest in storage, to be switched out when your child becomes bored with them. See [here](#) for more simple tips on making a space for your child to increase independence.
 - ❖ Support your child in choosing one activity at a time to build concentration, which leads to deeper independence.
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- ❖ Be patient as your child learns to do more things for herself. You can create a variety of open-ended activities that allow your child to engage in lengthy, concentrated play. Open-ended play includes activities that have no right or wrong way to do them, such as building, drawing, and dressing up. Learn more about open-ended play [here](#).
- ❖ Support your child in self-care activities like brushing their own teeth and hair, putting on their own clothes, etc. These are things with which we might often "help" a child when we are trying to get out the door in the morning, but this extended time at home allows for more time for your child to troubleshoot different ways of putting on her socks and shoes or choosing her outfit or practicing the zipper on her hoody.
- ❖ Create a [sensory bin](#). Sensory bins are simple and use everyday materials to promote creative play. You can use an under-bed storage box, small washing tub or other container with items like rice, beans, sand, water, shaving cream, pasta, and a variety of smaller containers, cups, and scoops for him to engage in pouring, pretend mixing, etc. Adding some plastic critters (dinosaurs or animal figurines, even Legos or blocks) can also invite a lot of creative, open ended play for your child.
- ❖ [Here](#) are some play dough recipes with simple household ingredients that even your toddler could help to create.
- ❖ You can offer your child a 10-15-minute window at the same time each day for a "together time" of child-directed play with you. This allows your child to know that they will have a special time with you, so when they want your attention and you are busy at home, you can remind them that "together time" is happening later. Hand in Hand Parenting has some great [resources](#) on creating a container of time to support your child. This also might be a nice way for you to release some tension and engage in the creative process of your child.
- ❖ Having a [visual schedule](#) can also help your child have a sense of mastery and control over his day, and provide a sense of security about what is coming next. This will allow him to build capacity for deeper concentration and creativity in his independent play.
- ❖ Know that there is no one right way to engage your child in being more independent. Trust your child's process, while giving yourself permission to be playful as well.

**"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning.
But for children, Play is serious learning.
Play is really the work of childhood." –Fred Rogers**

The Early Years Project is available for families of children five years old and under, living in Cambridge and Somerville, at no cost to you. During the Covid crisis, we are offering our services directly to parents rather than through childcare settings as we usually do. If you have concerns or questions about your child's needs, development, emotions, or behavior, or are having difficulty managing the stress of being a parent during this demanding time, please contact us at eyp@riversideecc.org or leave a message at 781-686-0435 to arrange for one our consultants to contact you. Our experienced child development and parenting specialists are here to support you by phone, video, email and can provide resources and referrals as needed. Please spread the word to families that you know in Cambridge and Somerville. We are a program of Riverside Community Care and are funded by the cities of Cambridge and Somerville.