



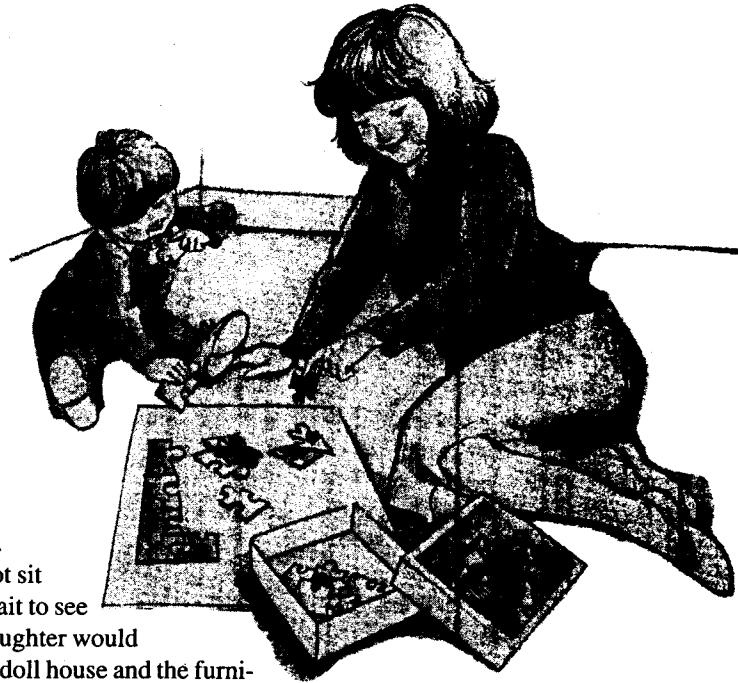
PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER

Lets Play!

by Dr. Carolyn Webster-Stratton, Ph.D.

HERE IS A WIDESPREAD belief among adults in our society that the free and easy playtimes between parents and children are frivolous and nonproductive. The deep conviction that play is trivial is reflected in comments such as, "She's only playing," and "Why bother to send them to preschool? All they do is play." This attitude is also seen in the tendency for parents to try to teach their children a variety of skills rather than to "just" play with them. In a society that places such a tremendous emphasis on achievement in school, economic success, and the importance of work, it is difficult to break loose from the idea that play is a waste of time.

As we play with our children, we sometimes try to structure or supervise our child's play by giving the child lessons on what to; for example, how to build the castle the "right" way. We may feel that we must teach our children what to do during play activities. By imposing structure on playtime, parents are attempting to make play a worthwhile activity. Unfortunately, this kind of play behavior in adults is often characterized by many commands and corrections. Too often, adults place undue emphasis on the "product" of play and expect their child to make the perfect valentine or to complete the puzzle correctly. This style of interacting can make the experience unrewarding for both child and adult. For example, a mother and her daughter start to play with a doll house. The mother says, "Let's put all the kitchen things in the kitchen." The child suggests a place for the kitchen, and the mother responds, "All the kitchen things must go over here." The mother quickly goes on to say, "And all the living room furniture must go over here." As the little girl begins to put some of the pieces of furniture into the living room, the mother moves on to show the child where to put the bathroom furniture. Soon the little girl stops playing, sits back, and observes her mother as she organizes all the furniture in the "correct" rooms. In this example, the mother is structuring and controlling the play activities.



She is, in fact, doing all the playing. She does not sit back and wait to see what her daughter would do with the doll house and the furniture. In fact, the mother's play is rather concrete and unimaginative! Probably, if the mother had been able to follow her daughter's lead, she might have found that the child's play was highly imaginative, with beds that could fly and bathroom furniture that could be put in any room of the house.

The most important first step in playing with a child is to follow the child's leads, ideas, and imagination rather than imposing our own ideas or values. Do not structure or organize the activities for your child by giving commands or instructions. Do not try to teach anything. Instead, imitate the child's actions and do what she asks you to do. You will find that when you sit back, follow your child's lead and give her a chance to exercise her imagination, she will become much more involved and interested in her play, as well as more creative. This approach also fosters children's development of independent play and independent ideas.

Children benefit from play with adults in several unique ways. When parents engage in play with their children, they can help them solve problems, test out ideas, and explore their imaginations. Through playtime parents can encourage the development of vocabulary so that children can communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs. Play with adults also helps children to interact socially by teaching them how to establish eye contact, to take turns, and to

be sensitive to the feelings of others. Moreover, play is a time when parents can actively respond to children in ways that contribute to their feelings of self-worth and competence. Studies have shown that children tend to be more creative and have fewer behavior problems if their parents engage in make-believe play with them when they are young. For these reasons, adult/child play makes an important contribution to the child's development. It is an opportunity for children to learn who they are, what they can do, and how to relate to the world around them.

(In our next Parent Connection, Dr. Stratton will address the important issues of fostering the repetitive play on which children thrive, avoiding power struggles during play and how best to encourage children's ideas and creativity as we play with them.)

We would like to welcome Dr. Carolyn Webster-Stratton as a regular contributor to Parent Connection. Dr. Stratton is the mother of two young children, a clinical child psychologist, a Professor of Nursing and Director of the Parenting Clinic at the University of Washington. During the past 10 years, she has done extensive research with 350 families studying parent-child interaction and its effect on child development. It is our firm conviction that as parents we can all benefit from the wealth of knowledge and insight which Dr. Stratton will share with us in this and future issues of Parent Connection.