



Attachment Play

How to solve children's behavior problems with play, laughter, and connection

ALETHA J. SOLTER, PH.D.

ALSO BY ALETHA J. SOLTER, PH.D.

The Aware Baby

Helping Young Children Flourish

Tears and Tantrums

Raising Drug-Free Kids

Attachment Play

How to solve children's behavior problems
with play, laughter, and connection

Aletha J. Solter, PH.D.

SHINING STAR PRESS ★ GOLETA, CALIFORNIA

Copyright © 2013 by Aletha J. Solter
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without written permission from Aletha Solter, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in critical articles and reviews.

Published by Shining Star Press
Post Office Box 206
Goleta, California 93116, U.S.A.
Phone & Fax: (805) 968-1868

Email: info@awareparenting.com
Website: www.awareparenting.com (The Aware Parenting Institute)

Book design: Studio E Books, Santa Barbara

Cover photo by Michael Rose, New South Wales, Australia
www.taodesigns.com.au

First printing 2013

Publisher's Cataloging Information
Solter, Aletha Jauch, 1945-
Attachment play: how to solve children's behavior problems with play, laughter,
and connection / by Aletha J. Solter
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN: 978-0-9613073-8-7
1. Child rearing. 2. Parent and child. 3. Psychology of play. I. Title.
Dewey Decimal Classification: 649'.1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012948709

Contents

Introduction	3
------------------------	---

PART 1

Getting Started

1. Introduction to Attachment Play	9
2. The Nine Forms of Attachment Play	13
3. General Guidelines	30
4. When You Find It Hard to Play	39

PART 2

Using Attachment Play to Solve Discipline Problems

1. Introduction to Non-Punitive Discipline	47
2. Eliciting Cooperation	51
3. Setting Limits	61
4. Toilet Training	68
5. Use of “Bad” Language	72
6. Anger and Aggression	77
7. Sibling Rivalry	86
8. Lying, Cheating, and Stealing	94
9. Homework	100
10. Bedtime	108

PART 3

Using Attachment Play to Help Your Child Through Difficult Times

1. Birth Trauma	115
2. Birth of a Sibling	120
3. Parental Divorce	125
4. Natural Disasters and Terrorism	131
5. Illnesses, Accidents, and Hospitalization	135
6. Separation Trauma	142
7. School Stress	148

8. Phobias and Anxieties	153
9. Preparation for Difficult Events.	162
10. Parental Anger	167

Appendix A

Summary Charts of the Nine Forms of Attachment Play	173
---	-----

Appendix B

Research Basis for Attachment Play	179
References Cited in Appendix B	191
Recommended Books for Parents.	199
About the Author.	201
What Is Aware Parenting?	203

Getting Started

“PLAY WITH ME, Mommy! Play with me, Daddy!” How often have you heard your children make this request? Children love to play, and they especially enjoy playing with their parents. When you play with your children, you meet their need for connection and help them feel loved. In fact play is one of the best ways to charge up your children’s emotional batteries.

This section describes nine specific kinds of activities that are especially effective in strengthening the parent-child bond. I call these activities attachment play. Many of these forms of play also lie at the root of effective discipline as well as emotional healing. These are the forms of play that I recommend most frequently to parents who are struggling with their children’s challenging behaviors or emotions.

Introduction to Attachment Play

HEALTHY PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT is vital for children's emotional health, and parent-child social interaction plays a major role in promoting healthy attachment. When our children are babies, we connect with them through silly little activities such as peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake, and we playfully imitate their sounds, blow bubbles on their tummies, play with their toes, rock them to music, and bounce them on our knees. These daily mutual interactions help babies acquire a sense of confidence, trust, security, reciprocity, humor, and joy. When we engage babies in these playful activities while remaining sensitive and responsive to them, they learn to communicate and connect with us.

If you continue to interact playfully with your children as they grow older, you can maintain a healthy attachment with them. When they say "play with me," they will feel truly loved and valued if you sit on the floor to join them in their fantasy play with dolls, trains, or blocks. You will find endless opportunities for connecting playfully with your children by playing board games or just being silly together.

If your family is stressed by factors such as work, illness, divorce, financial difficulties, the birth of a baby, or a move to a new home, the connection between you and your children may suffer. The attachment may weaken during these difficult times because you might (understandably) run out of patience or lack sufficient time to spend with your children. When this disconnection occurs, your children may begin to feel insecure, anxious, lonely, and powerless,

and their behavior may become more difficult. In fact, most discipline problems occur when children feel disconnected, powerless, insecure, or frightened.

Attachment play can be a powerful healing factor for these difficult times. Unfortunately, your children may need to play with you the most when you least feel like playing with them! However, if you can manage just 20 to 30 minutes of play per day, your children will benefit immensely. Remember, too, that it is never too late to engage your children in these forms of therapeutic play. You can play with your children at a later time to restore your connection and help them heal.

Laughter is an especially beneficial component of play. Research has shown that laughter can reduce tension, anxiety, and anger. By playing and laughing with your children, you can resolve many discipline problems and also help your children heal from stress or trauma. So laughing with your children or acting silly with them is never a waste of time!

Attachment play has a solid basis in scientific research. Findings from research studies support the effectiveness of these nine kinds of activities with children suffering from specific emotional and behavioral problems. (See Appendix B for a description of these studies.) However, attachment play can benefit *all* children, even those who are emotionally healthy and well behaved.

Attachment play has a unique set of characteristics, which differ from traditional games or sports. The following list describes these basic characteristics.

Characteristics of attachment play

What it is

- **Attachment play is interactive play that strengthens your connection to your children.**

You will feel closer to your children after doing the activities in this book, and you will bring out the best in each other.

- **Attachment play often involves laughter.**

You will laugh *with* your children, not *at* them. Laughter reduces tension, anxiety, and anger.

- **Attachment play can be either child initiated or adult initiated.**

Your children may initiate attachment play themselves, and this book will help you recognize their invitations to play. You can also initiate these activities yourself to resolve specific discipline problems or help your children through difficult times.

- **Attachment play does not require any special equipment.**

A major advantage of attachment play is that it's free! Many of the activities do not require any equipment at all, whereas others involve toys or objects that you probably already have in your home (such as dolls and pillows).

- **Attachment play can take place anywhere, at any time.**

You can do these activities in the bathroom, in your car, on the playground, at the doctor's office, or at bedtime.

- **Attachment play includes many familiar activities.**

If you play peek-a-boo with your baby, pretend to be frightened when your child growls like a lion, or find playful ways to deal with sibling rivalry, then you are already practicing attachment play.

What it isn't**• Attachment play is not permissive discipline.**

Attachment play can help you set limits and resolve common discipline problems. Your children will become more *willing* to cooperate, but they will not become “spoiled” or think that everything in life has to be fun.

• Attachment play does not teach children to be aggressive.

Some of the forms of play described in this book encourage children to be physically active, but they will *not* cause your children to become more aggressive or hyperactive. On the contrary, they will make your children calmer, gentler, more compassionate, and more cooperative.

• Attachment play is not a form of teasing.

These forms of play respect children and their feelings. They do not belittle children or make them feel incapable or inferior in any way. Instead, they will enhance your children's self-esteem and self-confidence.

• Attachment play does not involve competition.

Contrary to most traditional games and sports, these activities have no winners or losers. The essential point is that everyone has a good time, and nobody feels like a loser. Everybody wins during attachment play.

• Attachment play does not have any set rules.

These activities can change from one day to the next. You and your children may enjoy creating your own versions, which may differ from the descriptions in this book. Your invented games may even become your own unique family traditions.

The Nine Forms of Attachment Play

THERE ARE NINE basic kinds of play that meet the characteristics described in Chapter 1. The following chart summarizes these activities, and the sections in this chapter describe each in more detail. You will find summary charts for each kind of play in Appendix A and research findings about these forms of play in Appendix B.

The nine forms of attachment play

- Nondirective child-centered play
 - Symbolic play with specific props or themes
 - Contingency play
 - Nonsense play
 - Separation games
 - Power-reversal games
 - Regression games
 - Activities with body contact
 - Cooperative games and activities
-