

# Play Your Way Into Connection

My family has a funny story that has been passed down and fondly enjoyed at holiday get togethers over the years. A long time ago, my grandmother was traveling on a toll road, took an exit, and paid the toll, but for some reason she could not figure out how to get off the old highway and onto the new one. She continued to drive in a circle and pay the toll over and over, until a kind (and probably quite amused) toll operator helped her navigate in a different direction.



Just like in this story, foster and adopted parents may find themselves stuck in a negative pattern with their child that they just can't figure out how to get out of. Their relationship may be frozen in a loop of anger, resentment and frustration.



This negative cycle can be very frustrating and discouraging for both parties, but one proven way to navigate off this road is for the parent to intentionally interject play and fun into the relationship, even if they don't feel joy or closeness when they are with their child.

Having fun together is an experiential way to tell a child that relationships can be safe and pleasurable. Not only can play short circuit the negative beliefs and bad wiring that a child may have, but play can re-wire joy, trust and attachment. Play can send the message "I like you", "you're special to me" or "we can have fun together".

Being playful is an attitude shift away from negativity and into a cheerful, happy stance. It is adding lightness, joy, and silliness to everyday life.

Parents are not following their feelings, but are leading the emotional tone of the relationship. They are paying attention to not only their actions, but also to their facial expression and the tone of their voice.

How can a caregiver add playful engagement into the parent-child relationship, especially if the relationship is not in a good place?

The adult will need to set the mood, be intentional and look for everyday opportunities to initiate this type of interaction. Playful involvement does not need to be lengthy but can just be a short burst of happy, surprise interaction. Adding the elements of physical activity or touch are often helpful.



After parents get into the groove of being playful, they can begin to use their own creativity to interject play into the relationship with their child. Some examples to get parents started are:

1. Ask a question or answer your child in a funny voice or foreign accent.
2. Pretend that your kitchen is a fancy restaurant, take your child's order and make up an impressive name for the meal.
3. Sit on the couch and play a game mirroring each other's movements.

4. Take a walk together while playing follow the leader. Let the child have a turn where you follow them.
5. Take turns taking silly pictures of each other.

It may feel strange engaging with an older child in a more playful way. Typically, this type of interaction is reserved for babies and young children. You may feel uncomfortable at first, but give it a try. Break out of your comfort zone and see if you can surprise your child and yourself with a few minutes of positive interaction. Remember, shifting away from negativity and adding play will take time and practice for everyone, but a deeper connection is possible with lighthearted fun and intentional parenting.

*Do you need help learning to engage your child in a playful way? If so, contact us today! We offer small, affordable coaching groups and individual parent coaching. You can learn new skills and practice them in a small community of support. Visit our website at <http://empoweredcalling.com/> or contact Renee at [rwitkowski@empoweredcalling.com](mailto:rwitkowski@empoweredcalling.com).*