

A young child with dark curly hair, wearing a green t-shirt and blue pants, is sitting on a white rug. The child is looking down at an open book with colorful illustrations of animals. Surrounding the child are various toys: wooden blocks in different colors (green, blue, yellow, purple), a stack of colorful plastic rings, a blue ball with floral patterns, a clear tube filled with small beads, and several eggs. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

PLAYFUL CONNECTIONS:
Building bridges through play

Playful Connections

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Playful Connections

Introduction

Welcome to Playful Connections

Play is a huge part of a child's early communication, but for very young children with Additional Support Needs connecting through play can sometimes feel like a puzzle. As parents, carers, and Early Years Practitioners, we often find ourselves wondering: How do I join in without causing stress? How do I know if they want me there?

This booklet was created by the Psychological Service Home Visiting Teachers to help you navigate those moments. It is designed to shift the focus away from traditional "structured" play and instead focus on what truly matters: building meaningful, joyful relationships.

Inside, you will find:

- **The Trusted Play Partner Approach:** A way of playing that encourages us to follow your child's lead, embracing their unique interests, and focusing on the shared experience rather than a goal.
- **Understanding Assent and Consent:** Practical guidance on reading a child's non-verbal cues (like body language, facial expressions, and sounds) to know exactly when they are saying "yes" to playing together, and how to safely seek their permission without overwhelming them.
- **Play Ideas that Build Connections:** A collection of simple, everyday play routines (from "Teddy in a bed!" to "Sticky pompoms") carefully selected to spark curiosity, reduce the pressure to answer questions, and encourage communication.
- **Play Routine Guidance:** Ideas to help you plan your own play sessions for children who might need a little more repetition and predictability in their play.

Every child is different and there is no single "right" way to play. We hope this booklet gives you the confidence to slow down, notice the small signals, and build gentle bridges of connection with the child in your care.

Psychological Service Home Visiting Teachers, June 2026

Playful Connections

Trusted Play Partner Approach – A Definition

Follow their lead, on their terms	Join your child in whatever they choose to do, even if it is repetitive or specific play (like lining up or tipping out). Copying their actions can help them to notice you, accept your presence, and enjoy playing with you.
Embrace their interests	Use your child's specific interests as a strength to connect, communicate, and share play experiences. Focus on what brings them joy.
Be open to any communication and connection	Respond to all forms of communication including gestures, eye contact, body language, and sounds. This builds a strong connection and shows them that their voice matters. Show your own enjoyment and model different ways of responding.
Create a predictable, low-stress environment and routine	Set up a calm, distraction-free space using motivating toys to encourage engagement. Using a consistent play routine helps your child feel safe by knowing what to expect. Notice if they start to feel overwhelmed and need your help. Adjust the play routine to support them to manage their emotions.
Focus on the process, not the outcome	Prioritise a positive, shared experience over a specific goal. Being present and focusing on your child's happiness and engagement builds the trust they need to explore and learn.
Consent/assent to play	Look for facial expressions, body language, or vocal sounds to know when your child wants you to join them or when they need space. Always respect their choice to move away from the play.

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Play Tips

Motivation is key	Children play more when they are interested. Choose toys your child enjoys.
Toys don't have to be toys!	You can use everyday items from home. Try pots, spoons, cushions, blankets, torches, etc. Sometimes the novelty of a new toy can spark interest.
A helping hand	Pick toys your child needs a bit of help with. This can encourage them to look at you or ask for help.
Anything goes!	There is no right or wrong way to play with a toy. Join in and copy what your child is doing.
This goes with that!	Using toys that work well together might help the play last longer e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dolls and brushes• Soft toy and a spoon or cup• Buckets and spades
Not tasty!	Avoid toys with small parts. This is important if your child puts things in their mouth.
It's too much!	Watch for sensory sensitivities. It's hard to play with an overwhelmed or scared child!

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Permission to join my play

Professionals often wait for a child's permission before joining their play. It is important to respect a child's choices, even when they communicate through actions instead of words. When a child cannot say "yes" or "no," adults must read non-verbal cues like body language, facial expressions, or sounds.

The following table shows examples of how children might use actions to signal that they are ready to play.

Yes (Assent)	No (Dissent)	Ambiguous/No Signal
Moves closer to you, the object or toy.	Turns away from you.	They continue playing as if you are not there.
Reaches out or points to the toy.	Pushes your hand away or covers the toy.	They look at you, then back at their toys.
Softening/relaxed body posture.	Tense/rigid body posture or starts fussing/crying.	They repeat a previous action (stimming).
Gives eye contact (if typical for them).	Walks/crawls away from your spot.	They do not acknowledge your action.

Seeking my permission

Children often use behaviour rather than words to show if they want to join in an activity. This table gives practical examples of how you can swap typical questions for simple statements and physical actions, allowing your child to signal their consent safely.

Instead of asking...	Say this instead...	Do this action...
"Can I play with you?"	"I am going to sit here."	Sit a body length away and pat the floor.
"Can I have a turn with that?"	"My turn... Your turn."	Tap your chest, then tap their hand.
"What are you building?"	"I want to put this block next to yours."	Point to a block and wait for their reaction.
"Do you want to play with the car or the doll?"	"This one... or this one?"	Hold up both toys and shake them slightly.
"Can I help you with your tower?"	"I am going to put a block on."	Hold a block near the tower and pause.
"Shall we blow some bubbles now?"	"Bubbles."	Hold the bubble wand still and look at them.

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Teddies in a bed!

What you need

- A small bag to hold everything.
- A toy bed
- 5 – 10 teddies (use fewer or more if needed).
- Optional: number cards.
- Optional: small blanket.

How to play

- Take the bed out of the bag.
- Bring the teddies out one at a time.
- Let your child watch, join in, or take the lead.

Sing and play

- Try the song “5 in the Bed”.
- Use the teddies to do actions like “roll over”.
- When a teddy falls, say “weeee... bump!”

Your child might like to choose which teddy falls out next.



Follow your child's interest

Every child is different. Your child might:

- count the teddies;
- name colours;
- throw or tip the teddies out;
- watch quietly; or
- lose interest quickly.

This is all okay. Follow them and do more of what your child enjoys.

If your child loses interest

Try changing the play:

- Put a teddy in a toy car.
- Hide a teddy.

Extra play ideas

- Pretend the teddies are sleeping. Say “shhh!” and cover them with a blanket.
- Try a different song (e.g. “Monkeys Jumping on the Bed”). It doesn't matter if you use teddies instead of monkeys.

Why this game is helpful

This game helps you notice:

- what your child enjoys;
- how they respond to songs;
- their interest in numbers or colours; and
- how they play and explore.

Try again

- Play this game more than once. You may see small changes each time.

Playful Connections

Sensory board

What you need

- A sensory or busy board.

How to play

- Offer your child the sensory board.
- Let them explore in their own way.

Join in the play

- Sit alongside them and watch.
- Copy what your child is doing.

For example, your child might:

- only be interested in the switches;
- turn the board over to play with their cars; or
- carry it into another room.

Children often like:

- repeating the same action again and again;
- watching lights turn on and off; or
- spinning and moving parts.

Follow your child's interest

Every child is different and your child might:

- only focus on one part of the board;
- repeat the same action many times; or
- signal for help to do something.

This is all okay — follow what your child enjoys.

Ways to play together

- Sit beside your child or face them.
- Take turns using the board.
- Copy each other's actions.
- Some children may take your hand to help them join in.

This activity helps you notice:

- what your child enjoys;
- how they like to play; and
- any interest they may show in movement, lights, or textures.

Try new ideas

- Introduce different fidget toys.
- Add spinners to a wall or door at home.

Keep it simple and led by your child.



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Popping aliens

What you need

- A popping alien toy or 2 if possible.
- A tin, small container, pencil case, or bag.
- A box to keep everything in.
- Two trays (metal works best).



Getting started

Create layers by:

- putting the alien inside the tin;
- putting the tin inside the pencil case; then
- putting everything inside the box.

Get your child interested

- Sit on the floor with your child.
- Shake the box and say “wow!” or “what’s inside?”
- Open it a little and peek.
- Pause and wait.
- Let your child explore if they want to.

Explore together

- Help your child open each layer.
- Go slowly (box → pencil case → tin).
- If this feels too hard, use fewer layers.

Play with the alien

- Give your child the alien and watch what they do.
- Copy their actions or use your own alien to join in.

Make it pop!

- Show your child how to push the alien onto the tray.
- Let it “pop” off.
- Do it again if they want you to.

Support your child

- If your child wants to try to do it themselves, gently guide their hands if they are comfortable with that.
- Use simple words like:
 - “Help me”
 - “My turn”
 - “Your turn”
 - “Pop!”

Why this works

This activity can help build attention, interaction, and play skills.

Playful Connections

Sticky pompoms

Because this game might be new and unusual, the novelty alone is a great way to grab your child's attention.

Safety First: This game uses small parts. If your child still likes to put things in their mouth or swallow objects, please skip this game or swap the pompoms or counters for larger, child-safe items.

What You Need

- A sticky lint roller.
- A tub of colourful pompoms (different sizes).



How to Play

- Explore the roller: Hand your child the lint roller first. Let them check it out on their own. (If your child loves things that spin, they may love spinning the roller.)
- Add a pop of colour: Keep the tub of pompoms near you. Surprise your child by sticking one pompom onto their roller. That little element of surprise is great for getting them hooked!
- Keep it going: Even if they pull the pompom right off, just stick another one on (maybe a different colour or size) and say "More!" each time.

The Big Goal

Eventually, your child may love sticking and peeling the pompoms off all by themselves. When they pull one off, just pop it back into your tub. If they reach for another one, give them one by one, saying "More" as you hand them over. This fun back-and-forth is where the magic happens!

Top Tips & Variations

- Try pausing for a moment before handing over a pompom. Wait to see if they make a sound, gesture for it or say "more". Don't worry if it takes a few play sessions to get there, go at their pace.
- If your child tries to grab the whole tub of pompoms right away, hide the tub! Just keep a handful hidden in your pocket so you can hand them out one at a time.
- Pass a few pompoms to other adults in the room. Your child can walk between people to collect them, with everyone practicing the word "More" and giving a little pause before handing them over.
- To finish up, dump a big pile of pompoms into a tray. Let your child roll the lint roller right through them, or just happily stick and peel them as they wish.



You can play this same game using a magnetic wand and magnetic counters!

Playful Connections

Frog and octopus



If your child loves things that move about or jump, this game is a guaranteed hit – plus there are no small parts to worry about!

What You Need

- A pull-back toy (like a rolling octopus).
- A wind-up toy (like a jumping frog).
- A tray (to give the toys a smooth surface and keep them from rolling away).
- A box and a few small bags or containers to create layers to hide the toys inside.

How to Play

- Build the mystery: Before you start, hide the toys inside the bags, put the bags inside the box, and bring the tray over separately.
- Grab their attention: Sit on a play mat or blanket and place the box in front of you. Shake or tap the box, peek inside, and give a big, excited "Wow!" Pause and wait for your child to come over to investigate.
- The teamwork trick: Let your child choose one toy. (Children usually go for the wind-up toy, which is perfect because they may need your help to wind it up - hello, teamwork!). You keep the other toy for yourself.

The Big Goal

This game is all about easy, low-pressure communication. Use just a few words at a time. Watch what your child does and copy their lead. Instead of asking lots of questions (like "What colour is it?" or "What is the frog doing?"), just make simple comments like, "Go, frog!" or "Zoom!"

You can also use this time to practice taking turns by using simple phrases like "My turn" and "Your turn."

Top Tips for Success

- Keep the pressure low: Little ones often respond beautifully when they don't feel pressured to answer questions. Simply narrating the fun keeps things relaxing and enjoyable.
- Why the layers matter: Hiding the toys inside bags inside a box turns the setup into a fun game of discovery. This helps to build anticipation and focus before the toys even start moving!

Playful Connections

Reflective beads and tin

This game is a feast for the senses! It uses sights and sounds to grab your child's attention while helping them practice looking, reaching, and listening.



What You Need

- A shiny, stainless-steel metal bowl.
- A long strand of large play beads (like a bead garland or thick costume beads).

How to Play

- Sit down and start playing with the beads yourself first.
 - Put them in the bowl.
 - Move them around with your hands to make a noise.
 - Lift them up high and let them drop.
 - Shake the bowl.
- Let your child watch you and wait for them to join in. The shiny metal bowl acts like a mirror and makes a great echoing sound, which is appealing for young children. Wait for your child to lean in and start touching or looking at the beads.
- Comment on your play by using a fun, rhythmic voice to describe what is happening. Use simple words like:
 - "Up, up, up... and down, down, down!"
 - "Shake, shake, shake!"
 - "In... out."

The Big Goal

This game is excellent for teaching the concept of "Start and Stop." Try shaking the bowl and saying, "Shake, shake, shake..." and then suddenly freeze and say, "...and STOP!" Pausing like this helps your child learn to predict what happens next. They might look at you, make a sound, or gesture to tell you to start the shaking game all over again! If they don't just do it again anyway.

More Ways to Play

- Make Waves on the Floor: Take the beads out of the bowl and lay them on the floor. Wiggle them back and forth like a snake or a wave. This is highly motivating for little ones to track with their eyes, reach for, and grab.
- Why this game works: It completely skips the pressure of "structured" play. It simply lets your child explore cause-and-effect (doing an action to get a sound) through touch, sight, and hearing in a way that feels safe and fun.

Playful Connections

Lavender hippo and textured gloves

This is a relaxing routine to use when your child is feeling overwhelmed or when it is time to wind things down for a nap or bedtime.

What You Need

- A weighted soft toy.
- Lavender essential oil (optional).
- A pair of textured gloves (optional).
- Soft background music or your own singing voice.



How to Play

- Set the scene with scent: Put a drop or two of lavender oil onto the weighted toy. If you do this every time, your child will quickly learn to associate the smell with the activity. You can tell them, "The hippo smells like lavender. Let's take a big breath in... and out."
- Introduce the gloves: If you are using textured gloves, put them on and let your child touch them first to see if they like the feeling. If they don't, no worries at all! Just take them off and use your bare hands.
- Follow their lead: Start a gentle massage. Let your child guide you on what feels good for them. They might want their hands, feet, arms, or legs massaged. Even if your child doesn't use words yet, they can show you they want "more" by offering you their arm or leg. They can also show you when they want you to stop by pulling or turning away.
- Cuddle up: The weight of the toy can feel grounding and soothing. Your child could cuddle the heavy hippo while you massage them. If they don't want to hold it, the hippo can just sit nearby and "watch."

Top Tips for Parents

- Switch Roles: Your child might want to give you a massage! This is a way for them to copy you.
- Keep it flexible: This routine is about your child's comfort. If they only want a few seconds of massage, or just want to sit quietly smelling the lavender, that's okay. Go at the pace that suits them.

Playful Connections

Magnetic Blocks

What you need

- Magnetic blocks.

How to play

- Encourage your child to collect the blocks by:
 - picking them from a bag one at a time;
 - taking them from you.
- Let them explore the blocks in their own way.

For example, your child might:

- shake the blocks;
- bang the blocks together; or
- stack them.

Join in the play

- Play alongside them.
- Comment on their play using simple words or phrases.
- Copy what they do with the blocks.

What children may enjoy

Every child is different. Your child might explore:

- how the magnetic blocks stick together;
- the sounds they make;
- putting blocks together and pulling them apart; or
- by counting the blocks or sorting them by colour.

This is all okay. Follow what your child enjoys.

Why this game is helpful

This activity helps you notice:

- what your child is interested in;
- how they like to play; or
- their interest in colours, numbers, or sounds.

Try again

Bring the blocks out again another day. Your child may play with them in a new way. They might copy your play too.

Keep it fun, simple, and led by your child.



Playful Connections

Ducks in an egg

There are different ways to play with the ducks in an egg, but this can be a good way to engage children who might find shared play a bit tricky.

Build interest

- First, shake the egg to get your child's attention.
- Pause and wait to see if they try to open the egg. If they do follow their lead.

They might:

- tip the ducks out;
- line the ducks up;
- put the ducks back in the egg; or
- take the ducks and the egg off with them!

Join in by copying what they do.

Try again

If your child does not respond, open the egg for them. Tip the ducks out and say “wow!” in surprise.

Watch to see if they join in.

If there is no interest this time, put the ducks back and try again. You might need to repeat this a few times.

Add songs

Sing “5 Little Ducks” to see if it helps them join in or just to add to the fun.

Keep it simple

- Go slowly.
- Repeat the same actions.
- Give your child time to join in.

If they still don't show any interest put the ducks away and bring them out another day.

Try new ideas

Try using something else in the egg e.g. vehicles, balls, or something else that interests your child.



Playful Connections

Light up stick with spiky ball

This toy is good for getting children's attention because the ball only flashes for a short time and then stops. This could motivate your child to try and get it to flash again.

Catch their attention

Turn on the light-up toy.
Let your child see the flashing lights.
They may also enjoy the texture.

Build interest

The light turns on, then stops.
This helps build curiosity and waiting.
Repeat this a few times.

Let your child explore

If your child reaches for the toy, let them have it.
Watch what they do.

Be helpful

Sometimes children cannot make it light up again and they need your help.
Encourage them to give the stick back to you. Light it up and give it back to them.
Some children will bring it back to you themselves.

Build connection

Show your child that you can help and have fun.
The goal is not for them to do this alone, but to enjoy playing together.

Add simple words

Use words like:

“Ready... steady... go!”

“Stop”

“Again”

“Flashing”

You can use natural gesture to help support the communication.



Playful Connections

Silver foil survival blanket

Some children respond well to this activity, but others can find the blanket more challenging because it can be noisy and overwhelming. Take care.

Introduce it slowly

Open the blanket out slowly and hold it still at first.

Let it catch the light.

Use words like “shiny” and “bright”.

Begin to move it gently.

Cause and effect

When the foil moves, it makes a sound.

Small movements make quiet sounds.

Big movements make loud sounds.

Watch your child

Some children enjoy the noise, but some children do not like it. Watch for signs they are comfortable with the blanket before you move on.

Let your child watch if they do not want to join in.

Pause and wait

Crinkle the foil softly or loudly then stop and wait.

Watch for a look, sound, or movement.

Copy your child’s response.

Play together

Hold the blanket like a parachute.

Lift it up gently but don’t shake it at first.

Your child might hold a corner.

Use light carefully

Light can reflect off the foil.

Some children enjoy this but be mindful of sensitivity to light.

You could also use a torch or glow ball.

Create a calm space

If your child enjoys the blanket, use it to make a tent.

Place it over you and your child.

This can create a cosy sensory space.



Playful Connections

Play routine guidance

Using a play routine to support communication, shared attention, interaction, and play skills.

“A play routine is a purposeful way of playing and interacting with a child that follows a simple sequence. It involves predictability, repetition, and of course, lots of fun! Many toddlers (and young children) like knowing what to expect because it gives them a sense of comfort, security, and control. When they can anticipate what comes next, they are more likely to socially interact and communicate.”

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You can use a play routine to support several aspects of a child’s development. These could include supporting their language and communication, expanding the range of play skills they use, building up their shared attention and play. The play routine can also be used to practice the skills used in interactions such as watching, copying, listening to others, sharing, and turn taking. A play routine provides opportunities within a familiar structure to practice these skills.

To make the most of a play routine it is useful to consider the simple structure of **beginning**, **middle**, and **end**.

The beginning stage cues your child in. It signals the start of a familiar sequence of play that they know and enjoy. For the best chance of success at this stage, it is useful to consider the following points:

- **Time and place.** It’s important to find a quiet time within your day when you are less likely to have interruptions. Make sure it is a time when your child is happy and not too tired or hungry. Consider switching off the TV and putting your phone on silent. Find a comfortable space for this routine where there are not too many distractions, and other toys are not easily accessible. Do you have a cosy space in your house that your child already likes to go to?
- **Cueing in the routine.** Start the play routine the same way each time. It may be that you shake out a blanket and lay it on the floor. Perhaps you cue them in using a photo of your chosen special place. You might start off with a song, some music or even just holding up a little toy box. Using the same cueing in words each time helps your child know what’s coming next. However you choose to start the routine try to be consistent.

The middle stage of the routine is about having fun and making connections through your shared play. This is when you get to practice watching, copying, listening, turn taking and maybe even some sharing using whatever your child wants to play with.

When they are comfortable with the routine you might try to model a different way to play with a toy and see how they respond. You may try to introduce something new to the game. Doing this could help your child to engage with an activity or toy for longer and build up the amount of time they share this play with you. If this is not what they want just now that’s okay.

Playful Connections

As the play routine becomes more familiar, you might want to add in some gentle challenges. You could try:

- Introducing a new animal sound or try matching the animal sound to the wrong animal. Does your child notice this and how do they react?
- Add a tool to the sand tray. How do you model using it and do they notice?
- Offer a choice from two – “Will we build towers? Blocks or Stickle Bricks?” How do they make a choice? Do they look, reach for, point, etc.

At the end of the play routine, it is useful to cue your child in that the play is ending. You can try different ways to show this such as saying “2 more minutes”, singing a tidy up song, or sounding a beeper from a digital timer. Its helpful for them to know what’s coming next so have something else for them to move onto. Again, using a consistent approach is best as it signals the end of the routine and moving onto something else.

Things to consider:

- **Your position.** Consider where you sit for the play routine. It’s usually best to be on the floor, at your child’s level. From this position you can notice and copy their play, watch for their reactions and expressions, model play, and be available for support if needed. You don’t need to be so close that they find your presence a challenge. You don’t have to be face-to-face if they find this uncomfortable. Just try to be alongside them and ready to play.
- **Your role:** Follow your child’s play - be their mirror. Initially you might start by copying what they are doing, and hopefully they’ll notice this. Don’t rush this step. Following their lead is important as it helps them learn to trust you as a play partner. It can be helpful to use a set of identical or similar toys as your child may not be ready to share. You could ask your child to help you do something like pulling blocks apart. Sharing play together, even for a moment, can help build the play relationship.
- **Narrate your play:** As you play, talk aloud about what you’re doing e.g. “Teddy’s hungry”, or “another block on top”. You want them to hear key words and short phrases being used in context. This might encourage them to look at what you’re doing.
- **Repetition and frequency:** Most toddlers and young children love repetition because the play becomes predictable and they’re more confident to join in. When it feels safe you can try adding in something new to extend their play. Consider how often you make time for the play routine and how long it might last.
- **Changing the play routine:** If your child seems to be losing interest in the game, think about adding in more steps or something different. If this doesn’t work perhaps it’s time to change the toy or activity altogether.