

Playful Games for Tricky Times



Stephanie Heartfield



Why Play?

Play may seem like the counterintuitive thing to do when your child is being uncooperative, resistant and frankly, a pain in your behind. However, when children behave like this, it is because something is going on within them, and they are communicating through their behaviour.

“Laughter is the best medicine” is one of those cliché quotes that everyone knows, and at the same time has so much truth, especially in tricky situations.

Laughter has been proven to release fears, anxiety and stress. When we don't have these extra visitors on board, we function better. We are more connected, cooperative and loving both to ourselves and others. Our children are no different, they have the same emotional needs that we do.

Lawrence Cohen, author of *Playful Parenting* said “follow the giggles,” so keep this in mind as you use play to overcome the following five tricky times you may find yourself in with your child. Not only will your child feel better, but you will also feel calmer, happier and most importantly, more connected to your child. Finally, have fun, use your imagination and creativity. Use this little eBook, not as a rule book, but as a source of inspiration to ignite your inner child of fun, laughter and joy, that tends to get a little lost in the world of parenting and adult life.

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Getting Out The Door

Do you ever have those moments where you just need to get out the door and your child resists you every step of the way?

There's a power struggle, you both end up screaming at each other, you both become more worked up and the rest of the day just seems miserable. Sound familiar?

Well, the good news is, is that you have the power to turn the entire situation around.

Here is one of the games my own children and I love to play during these tricky times.



“The Door Won’t Let Me Leave”

This game involves you attempting to walk through the door, but for some reason you just can’t seem to step out the door. It’s like there is a forcefield preventing you from leaving.

As you feebly try to exit your house, you can say things like:

“I don’t understand, why can’t I get through”

“What’s going on?”

“Come on door please let me through, please???”

You can add some pretend shoulders to the door way, as you pretend to barge your way out.

Listen to your child’s laughter, where the laughter is, follow it.

It may get to the point where your child is so over your incompetence that they can just walk through the doorway, leaving you inside “What!? How did you do that, why can’t I get out?”

Basically, you pretend to be really baffled, confused and powerless as to why you can’t get out the door, and maybe your child can.

This will release all the feelings about rushing out the door, going to an appointment and the resistance that goes with that.

And by all means, add yours and your child’s own flare to the game. Make it yours.



Lashing Out At Others

Does your child tend to lash out at others – hitting, kicking, pushing, bickering?

When our children act out, it is because they are disconnected from themselves and from those they love. They feel powerless, and to counteract that powerlessness they lash out at others. So, when you see your child in this state, punishments and time outs will actually further disconnect them and exacerbate the problem.

If you want to know what the neuroscience says, here is a brief explanation:

The emotional turmoil that we feel comes from our “downstairs” brain, and our rational thinking comes from our “upstairs” brain. When children are acting out, it is because their upstairs brain is no longer connected, so to speak, and the best way to reconnect it, so that they can think before they act, is to offer love, acceptance and compassion. That’s why play and laughter is so effective, because your child will feel connected to you, safe, loved and will make better choices.



“The Love Monster”

You know those times where your otherwise lovingly, cooperative child becomes aggressive, irritable and starts taking it out on other people or other things? Well, those times are where the Love Monster works its magic.

When you notice your child acting in an aggressive way, you can move in as a clumsy, awkward Love Monster, whose sole purpose is to spread love to children who are angry, frustrated and disconnected. To do this you can say to your child “Do I see a child who needs some more love?” Then you can move in to your child clumsily saying “I must hug you, you need more love.” Your child will probably want to run away and you can bumble along behind them saying “you need more love.” Once you get to your child shower them with hugs and “I love you.” If they get away, “hey where did you go, you still need more love.” Your child will laugh and giggle. Once you notice them relax, you know the work of the Love Monster has succeeded.

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Medical Appointments

Is your child due to have a medical appointment or procedure and you're not sure how to prepare them? Or do they already know and they have become anxious, nervous and maybe even angry? This playful game can help your little one to feel a little bit more secure, and release those scared feelings.



“The Bumbling Patient/Doctor”

To start with, I would recommend that your child assigns the role of patient and doctor to each of you, and then you can swap roles.

No matter what your role though, you will be acting like a bumbling, confused and silly patient/doctor. Remember, this won't necessarily mean that your child will act like this at their appointment/procedure, this is a means to get your child to release their scared feelings through laughter and connection with you, so that they feel more confident going into their appointment.

Bumbling patient: if you start as the patient, you can pretend you hurt a part of your body, you're unwell or just need fixing. Ask your doctor if you can lie down so they can see what's wrong with you. For example, maybe you broke your arm. You can mock exaggerate the hurt “oh it hurts so much, it feels like it's fallen off” and then indicate your arm as your foot. Your child will probably correct your complete incompetence at recognising your own anatomy. You can then say “thank goodness you know what's what doctor.” This will help your child feel powerful in their role as a doctor, which can counteract their feelings of powerlessness about their medical appointment/procedure.

Bumbling doctor: you could have your child lie down and ask them how you can help them. They might say their tummy hurts. You can then go their knee “oh here's your tummy, hmm it does look a bit odd.” Your child will most likely giggle and re-direct you to their abdomen. You can overshoot their abdomen and look at their neck “oh here it is I found your tummy.” Once again there will be laughter and your child will show you where their tummy is. You can start to get mock confused “what that can't be right, are you sure that's your tummy?” You can continue like this, as your child releases their fears through laughter, and finds your incompetence as a doctor hilarious.

Separation Anxiety

Is your child reluctant to leave your side, acting like your mini-me barnacle? Separation anxiety is something all infants and children experience in their early years, and contrary to popular belief, in some kids it doesn't disappear after toddlerhood. In fact, it can be normal for some children to experience separation anxiety until about 8 years of age.

Going into new situations, or returning to familiar surroundings after absences can lead children to experience separation anxiety. We are their safe place, and they feel like they cannot be safe without us there.

The following game can help to mimic certain aspects of separation anxiety, while also eliciting laughter which will relieve feelings of anxiety, helplessness and apprehension.



“Where’d You Go?”

If you notice your child feels reluctant, anxious, nervous about going somewhere, that's away from you, like daycare or school, you can play this game before you leave. For the purposes of this game, we will use Lily as the child's name, just switch it out for your child's name. You can start by saying “hmm where did Lily go? I swear she was just here.” Look around the room in confusion. Here your child may hide from you or walk up to you and say “here I am.” If they hide, you can keep looking around the room, looking for your child. Once they appear and state their whereabouts, you can jump in mock fright “oh my goodness where did you come from? I didn't even see you.” You can then keep repeating this by turning around, saying your child's name, turning back around and stating “what where did Lily go again?

She was just here.” Your child will giggle and laugh at your incompetence to locate her/him, this will ease some of the anxiety and give them more confidence for when you do drop them off.



Swearing/Potty Mouth

Are you finding your child is swearing like a sailor? Or perhaps saying words that you find less than desirable, especially when there is the potential they will blurt it out in public? This game may not be every parents' cup of tea, it all depends on your threshold for swear words. We all have our own unique limits, so if this game doesn't resonate, you don't need to use it to curb your child's swearing.

Now, maybe you've tried banning your child's swearing, but to no avail. Generally, when we ban something, our children just fight back, become defiant and do their best to annoy us. With that in mind, sometimes it is better to collaborate and come up with a solution that meets everyone's needs. Remember, that words do have emotions behind them, so maybe your child feels so frustrated, angry or powerless that the only way they can feel in control is to blurt out a few less than desirable words. If instead of doing a blanket ban of swear words, we offer times and places where children can swear, it means the child can get the words out of their system in a place we deem more acceptable instead of in the middle of a shopping centre.



“The Secret Swearing Place”

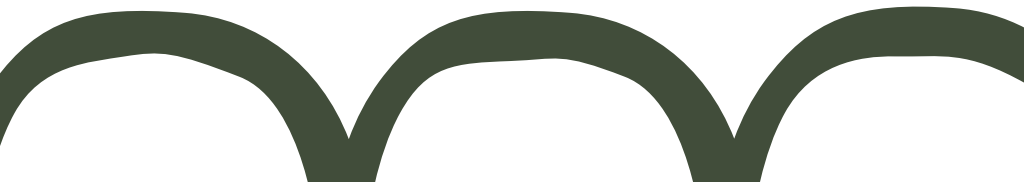
This is a game we use in our house, and to great effect. By great effect I mean my children do not blurt out swear words in the middle of the grocery aisle, and we all end up laughing with the absurdity of what happens.

If you're reading this before your child's next swearing meltdown, you could have a quick conversation with them about how some people find swearing offensive, especially in particular locations.

However, you recognise their need to swear, so perhaps you could both come up with a place and a time for swearing, so you can both get all your swears out, and not risk it happening in the most awkward of moments. Maybe it is in the afternoon after a long day at school, or on the weekend, and it's in your child's bedroom, or if you're already home, maybe it's in the spur of the moment.

My children and I have agreed that they can swear in our house, as long as there are no visitors. This has worked really well, and they have adhered to the agreement because they have never sworn in front of others or in public.

I like to set a timer, work with whatever time you have available, it may just be 5 minutes. Go to your swearing place with your child, and for the next 5 minutes both of you can let out all your swear words. These words aren't directed at either of you, more it is a safe place where you can both have some fun. I printed off a Shakespeare Insult list to use as inspiration. Yours and your child's imagination is the limit. You will both be in stitches with some of the ridiculous words that come out in those 5 minutes. You will also have the added bonus of connecting with your child, so that they will be more cooperative after your swear session.



Schooling At Home

Getting your child to do their schoolwork or homework can be an all-out battle between the 2 of you. This is especially true currently, with many children doing lockdown schooling from home. You nag your child to do the work, they become resistant, an argument ensues, you get the picture.

Sometimes our children are resistant because they don't want to mess up or get it wrong, they feel incompetent and stressed about the expectations placed upon them.

The game that I recommend for these times, first occurred for me spontaneously when I was a parent helper at my son's school literacy groups. I was assigned the group that had my son plus 3 other children, all bright readers. One of the children was known to be uncooperative, distracting to the other children and also fidgety. The teacher said he would take this child off my hands because he was "difficult." I replied that this child could stay here with the rest of his reading group and that I could handle anything that came up. The teacher looked at me doubtfully.

Well, that child was "difficult," he was rocking in his chair, refusing to participate and not listening. So, I turned it into a game, he found it hilarious, read the book fluently and paid attention for the rest of the literacy group.



“I Can’t Read”

Sit next to your child at the table where they are refusing to do their schoolwork, or maybe they are having trouble completing it because it’s “too hard.” Pick up the book or worksheet upside down “wow this is tricky, I’m finding it really difficult to understand this.” You can even try reading the words backwards. Your child will either start laughing, or look at you like you’re a complete moron. They may say “Mum you’re holding the paper upside down” or “you know how to read.” You could reply with “oh silly me” or “hmm I don’t know what happened, one minute I could read and now...what am I going to do” (said in a dramatic voice) or “I can read see” and you proceed to continue reading the words backwards so you are speaking gibberish. Basically, you’re being mock silly, incompetent and incapable of doing their schoolwork. Your child will laugh, possibly call you a loser (or similar) and then try and correct you.

When they get to the correction page, you can either pretend you are still struggling or say “wow how did you know all that, I didn’t have a clue.”

This game is all about making your child feel powerful in a powerless situation. You are in essence acting out their feelings of incompetence. And if they don’t end up correcting you because the schoolwork is quite confusing, well then at least you both had a big laugh about it, reconnected and can now move forward with a lighter, more care free mood.





More Information

Play is such an effective way to deal with many different tricky situations, reconnect with your child and have lots of fun along the way. It can be used as a tool to release some fears and anxieties, as well as a more respectful tool to discipline your child's challenging behaviours.

I invite you and your child to get creative, ignite your imagination and create your own games. Once you start using play more often, you will find it hard to go back. There is something special about play that promotes joy, happiness, love and connection.

You can also purchase The Spirited Hearts® Play Files for even more playful ways to support children on the website.

You can find more information on my website
www.spiritedhearts.net or Instagram @Spirited_Hearts.

I offer 1:1 session where I help Parents and Early Childhood Educators in many of the tricky times we face with our young children.

I wish you all the best of this playful journey with your child.

Have fun!





About Steph

Stephanie Heartfield is an Aware Parenting Instructor, Parenting Support Counsellor, and Early Childhood Educator. She runs her own Family Day Care, with a strong focus on Aware Parenting, nature play and child-directed learning.

Steph has almost 20 years of experience and qualifications in psychology, counselling, child development, trauma, neuroscience and early childhood education and care.

Her greatest passion is to see children and their families thrive through joy, love, compassion and fun.



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