Principle 4: Make it fun during COVID-19

Environments for children and young people should be friendly and provide them with opportunities to develop and grow.

Children and young people tell us that the most important place in their life is their home. That’s where they feel most safe, where they can play and learn how to deal with the world around them. But home life has changed dramatically in many homes as a result of the pandemic - loss of job, loss of home, 'home schooling', transitioning back to school, increased online time, caring for family and friends who are elderly, sick or isolated. Everyone in the family is affected by these changes.

While practitioners will have received COVID-19 information, resources and innovative tools to help parents and carers through these times, one important ingredient – fun – might have been overlooked. Take a moment once in a while to turn the dial down on serious and turn the dial up on fun. Play is something we all can do to have fun!

Play is the work of childhood. Play is a vital part of a child’s experience. Through play children learn about their world and practice how to take part in it. Brain research shows that early play experiences profoundly impact a child’s brain development. The benefits of play include:

- giving children a sense of power and control
- enhancing imagination
- allowing for investigation and repetition
- promoting longer attention span
- fostering deeper interests
- decreasing stress
- building social and turn-taking skills
- allowing children to practise different roles
- encouraging language development
- having fun!

Tips for play. Play and creativity are great ways to support and comfort children and young people during this time. Here are some tips:

- let the child or young person lead the activity
- get down to their level
- be attentive and listen first, reflect and then respond
- model communication skills
- communicate your thoughts and feelings sincerely
- encourage them to talk about what's on their mind and offer their opinions on topics that are important to them
- avoid distractions; keep your focus on the child or young person.
How can I create fun?

Creating fun spaces. During this pandemic, children and young people are spending large amounts of time in confined spaces, in new environments or in a new residential setting. Try to ensure that the environments are child friendly and inviting. Caring adults can also encourage them to have a sense of ownership and control over their environment and provide fun opportunities to feel connected to the people around them.

Children and young people have told us that putting up their own artwork on the walls, setting up and moving furniture and being able to unpack and spread out their belongings helps them feel at home. It’s the little things that count – these can make the greatest impact when creating a child-friendly space. It’s also important to create emotionally safe places.

Here are some tips on creating safe havens for children and young people to play in:

- Being more child friendly everywhere.
- Sometimes contact with children and young people needs to take place in environments that are not child friendly, such as offices or meeting rooms. And sometimes work can take a parent’s or carer’s attention away from children. This can be stressful for adults and kids alike. One way to remedy this is to take child-friendly treats with you: together at home or when you are out.
- Providing time, support and opportunities to strengthen parent-child relationships is one of the most crucial tasks for workers who support families. Helping to develop the parent-child relationship through play and fun makes it even more worthwhile.

Activity 1: Friendly maps

Use this activity to gauge how child friendly an area is, to get feedback from kids on what areas feel safe and don’t feel safe, and to get ideas from children on how things may be improved for them.

Click on the page icon above to access the activity.

Activity 2: Having fun in quarantine

Adults have come up with light-hearted terms for the current situation, such as overload (for information overload), and working at the isodesk. During the more restricted lockdown period, some families invented creative solutions to celebrating birthdays, such as putting teddy bears and dolls outside the neighbours’ houses, or hosting drive-by birthday parades. Children and young people can come up with their own creative words and their own alternatives to play. Encourage them to be inventive.

Have you seen some of the great fun family quarantine activities on YouTube? You could watch them together - or even better make one of your own!