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Lacy Morise December 16, 2014

Are You Wearing Your Play-Based Hat Today?



Ever leave the house and not know what to wear? As an early intervention SLP, I wear many hats, and there are days when I'm not sure which hat (or hats) I'll put on. As any therapist knows, the nature of our job is not just treatment related, but often much more. Of course the hat I wear most often is my speech therapy hat but when I enter the homes of my "kids" every week I sometimes encounter life that requires me to be more than just an SLP.

There is a trust that forms when you regularly enter someone's home. Families respect you not only as their child's SLP, but also as a resource for other parenting questions. These questions might require my community resource hat, my fellow parent hat or my support hat. Because the parents of our clients trust us to meet many needs, it is important that when they ask

questions or seek guidance we are thereto help.

For example, many families today experience a societal pressure to push their child well beyond what is developmentally appropriate. Parents set unrealistic expectations for their children and panic if they feel their child isn't "keeping up." I'm concerned when I enter homes filled with obscene piles of toys, a television constantly going and a toddler who manipulates my phone and tablet more skillfully than I do! Through my sessions I model play, in the absence of fancy toys and electronic devices, hoping the parents will realize how simply PLAYING with their child is enough. There's no better way to achieve developmental milestones and enrich children than through play.

Sometimes my example isn't enough...well OK, it's often not enough. So frequently I have a conversation about age-appropriate expectations, age-appropriate toys and what children need most from their parents.

When pondering how to start this conversation, I often find myself asking: What can I do to educate families on the importance of play? What can I say to drive home age-appropriate expectations? What are some of the most important points to stress to the families I serve? Professionally, I branched into owning a business devoted to play, plus I learned about how play is changing and why it matters.

Here are some tips you may find helpful to educate parents about the importance of simple play:

- Remind families that children need unstructured playtime and give specific examples of what is learned when a child does "nothing." A toddler's day should consist mostly of unstructured play and opportunities to experience their world with all their senses. Tell parents that this is the best way for their child to learn.
- Share with parents the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation of no screen time before age 2 and only two hours per day for children older

than 2. Parents are usually shocked to hear this, but even a television in the background distracts a baby/toddler and can make it more difficult for them to focus and learn.

- Inform parents that babies and toddlers do not truly learn anything from flashcards. The powerful marketing beast can sell just about anything to an anxious parent who wants that best for her child. However, research and experience do not support their use, particularly at such an early age. Share what you know about play-based options for teaching language skills.
- Encourage parents to slow down and follow their instincts. Oftentimes parents know what's best for their child, but are influenced by outside sources. As professionals, we can reassure parents to trust themselves.

If you are an EI SLP I hope you realize your importance not only in the life of the child you serve, but his family as well. You are appreciated and trusted, so may you guide your families so that they are able to enjoy the miracle of their child to the fullest. Choose your hats wisely and don't keep all that knowledge about PLAY under your hat. We all have a role in supporting families and enriching children's lives.

Lacy Morise, MS, CCC-SLP of Berryville, Virginia works for the West Virginia Birth to Three Program as an early intervention therapist. She also owns *Milestones & Miracles* (with her EI PT bestie, Nicole Sergent, MPT) Read her [blog](#) and like her on [Facebook](#), follow her on Twitter [@milestonesm](#) and [Pinterest](#).