

Supporting Independent Play Skills in Young Children

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To reduce passive screen time in young children, we need to increase their independent play skills.



Here's how...

Start young. Independent play skills begin in infancy. Babies learn to entertain themselves by chewing on their hands or toys, shaking a rattle, looking at a mobile, batting at toys on a baby gym, kicking their legs, cooing, blowing raspberries, and so on.

Let your child get bored. Boredom is the fuel for creativity. Unstructured free time is necessary for boredom to set in. Try scheduling in 30 minutes of daily free play (no screens during this time...for children or adults).

Provide an environment that fosters play. Reduce distractions during playtime by 1) turning off the TV, 2) keeping digital devices (phones and tablets) out of sight, and 3) offering fewer toy choices to reduce clutter in the play area (this does not mean you should get rid of all your toys; rather, keep them in one room of the house and bring two or three into the room where the child is playing—this makes clean-up more manageable as well).

Limit battery-operated toys that passively entertain the child. Choose toys that encourage the young child to learn naturally through discovery and exploration. Toys that “do nothing” are best.

Set up the toy and model how to play with it. Some children need to be shown HOW to play with their toys. As the child begins playing, the adult can gradually step away from the play area.

Be interested in the child's play. Make occasional comments so the child knows you are present and engaged. Independent play does not mean you leave the child alone and go into another room of the house. Independent play for a young child typically happens while the adult is doing something (a chore or relaxing) nearby.

Avoid unnecessary interruptions. If the child is focused, be respectful of the play process, and observe without being a distraction. Learning does not only occur during adult-directed play; children should be responsible for their own learning sometimes.

Know the child's interests. Make playtime relevant by knowing what gives the child his or her “brain tingles.”

Keep expectations reasonable. Start with 2-3 minutes of independent play, and then build from there. Make the expectations clear to the child: “You play with your blocks for 3 minutes while I finish my coffee, then I will come play with you.” Use a timer or other visual cue to help the older child understand the time expectations.

Establish family screen time rules. Children should *not* have unlimited access to screens. When screen time is requested, it is okay to say *no* and offer other options. “Screen time is not a choice right now. You can read books or play with your blocks.” Examples of screen time rules include: 1) no screens during mealtime, 2) no screens in the toy room, 3) you may have 30 minutes of screen time after nap, 4) we shut the screen off when your show is over, 5) no screens after 7 p.m.