

Question: How can I get my child to play on her own?

Sure, parties are fun, but learning how to play independently is a valuable skill that involves Focus and Self Control. And there are lots of ways to help your child develop this life skill as you support her in playing on her own.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Support your child's interests.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley says: "Children possess an inborn imagination and a passion to explore and learn."

Caring strongly about interests beyond yourself takes true focus. Children are more likely to spend time immersed in play when they are deeply interested in or passionate about what they're doing.

- **Watch your child and talk with her about what she's interested in.** Look for books, toys or other materials that can spark her imagination and extend her play. Your encouragement is important to her move toward independence.

2

Encourage your child to ask her own questions and explore.

Laura Schulz of MIT conducted an experiment with preschoolers to investigate the role of curiosity in learning by giving children pop-up toys where it wasn't clear which handle made which toys pop up. She found that children are more likely to stick with one of these toys instead of moving on to something new when adults don't show them how the toy works, but let them explore. Schulz observes: "Children keep playing until they discover how it really works."

Curiosity is powerful. When your child is curious, she's motivated to wonder and to learn more. There are many ways to foster her curiosity..

- **Use open-ended questions and comments to focus your child's attention and extend her pretend play.** Say things like: "I wonder where your train is going?" Or "Yum, I see you're cooking something. What will you put in it?"

Try not to take charge; instead, help your child learn to take the lead in managing herself.

For more ways to help your child learn and develop, visit
mindinthemaking.org and vroom.org

MIND in the Making
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

- **When your child shows genuine interest in something, no matter how little it may seem to you, take time to acknowledge her curiosity.** Talk with her about it. Model focused attention for your child, while showing that her ideas are valuable to you.

3

Help your child develop her own ideas for playing independently.

Help your child become more independent in her play by suggesting practical ideas.

- **Make a plan.** Explain that your daughter will have time when she plays by herself. Ask her what she would like to do during that time so she makes a plan, even if it is only for a few minutes.
- **Evaluate how the plan worked.** After she has tried out this plan, ask her how it worked. What made it work well? What didn't work and needs to be changed?
- **Create an activity list together.** As your child becomes more comfortable spending small amounts of time playing by herself, make a list of activities with her that she can do on her own. Post this list where she can see it, using pictures or words to help her remember and "read" the list.

By giving your child some control over how to spend her time, and encouraging a system with plans that are later reviewed, you help your child develop independence. You also help your child develop working memory skills, which are involved in creating and following through with plans.

4

Engage your child in games that promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control.

Your child learns from trial and error. In fact, when you react to your child's mistake as simply a normal part of learning, you do more than help your child become more independent: you teach your child a helpful approach to life.

- Guessing games and puzzles require your child to pay attention.
- Games that have rules and sorting games build working memory, self control and flexible thinking when the rules are changed.