** Top Tips for Making the Most of Playtime During Lockdown**

 **(The science of Playful Triangulation during isolation)**

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 **In conjunction with the Fisher-Price ‘Playtime for Everyone’ report**

Here are eight practical Top Tips to help parents begin to form a battle plan against this period of isolation with children under three:

**1. Take Time Together:** The first three years are vital for playful and safe relationships – they build a protective factor for life even in the midst of a pandemic. ‘Playful Triangulation’ has a positive bio-feedback loop for adults too. The brain loves playful novelty and causes dynamic neural activity – literally positively sculpting the brain.

**Getting practical:** Try rotating toys every two days and watch your child’s delight as they rediscover old toys. Set time aside each day to enjoy a toy with your child - just short bursts of concentrated activity – (around ten minutes). Be as imaginative as possible – cast away your inhibitions and use different voices and adopt a playful – (even silly!) attitude to increase the fun with the toy. It sends out the message ‘we are really interested in this together.’

**What’s in it for parents?** Try to notice how it makes you feel too. Gradually, you will sense that your anxiety at a world turning upside down diminishes as you get down to joint playing. While it might not happen every time, the best playtimes are when you both enter a state of ‘flow’ – this is when you lose track of time and your imaginations fly away together.

**2. Routine reap rewards:** In times of chaos (such as a pandemic), humans thrive on having some sort of stability. Adults need this as much as children. Design a daily routine that gives a rhythm to the day. It will help propel you both through the day.

**Getting practical:** Even in a small flat, parts of it can be dedicated to certain activities for particular short periods each day. For example, place an old sheet over two chairs and create a den; a plastic sheet on the floor can offer a place for tearing and pasting; washing up time at the kitchen sink offers therapeutic water play. Exercise time can take place in the hallway (if there is one) with an obstacle course created out of cushions. Children’s telly time can be shared (research shows that co – viewing has great benefits). Meal times can enlist the expert help of your young child too (however limited that might be… just staying involved will keep them interested and out of mischief). Later in the day, Skype time with friends and family followed by extended bath time and a bedtime story gives the day a good ‘shape’.

**What’s in it for parents?** Routine will calm your physiology too: your heart rate goes down and your breathing relaxes.

**3. Closeness Counts:** We may be in an enforced time of isolation (shielding vulnerable people) but with extremely close contact there are ‘proximity’ benefits associated with relationships. Be the ‘safe haven’ for your child as this offers a great bonding ‘set up’ for life. A ‘safe haven’ means that you can feel like a lighthouse to a child who, although they might not understand what is happening, will sense the anxiety of the world around them.

Getting practical: Choose toys that bring you close together. Remember that simply playing is the perfect way a child learns. ‘Education’ at this age is playing and feeds the developing brain. Don’t try to ‘teach’ just make sure you sit close to your child and face each other. Smile and laugh together as much as possible! This creates a happy and healthy bond between you. Limit their exposure to the news – although they won't understand the words – they pick up the deep feelings of anxiety transmitted.

**What’s in it for parents?** It’s win-win for boosting that feel good factor and just what the immune system needs.

**4. Eye to Eye:** Mutual gaze literally gets to the heart of the relationships it recognizes shared pleasure whilst playing together. Interpersonal neurobiology is all about ‘joint attention.’ Sending out the message: ‘We are in this together’.

Getting practical: Find a toy that you can both share and be sure to look your little one in the eye as you talk– it works wonders. Set aside daily FaceTime /video calls with friends and family. Watch how your young child reacts to those familiar faces and will start to share what they have been playing with you during the day.

What’s in it for parents? Face to face contact (even virtually) yields rewards. Looking in another’s eyes is known to bring about a closer ’link’ so, video calling is more beneficial than simply hearing voices on the phone.

**5. Playful Partners:** Combat any corrosive cortisol (released during stress). Being playful can be a clever antidote to anxiety.

**Getting practical:** Choose a toy (age appropriate for your little one) that reminds you of a time in your childhood and share it with them. Feel free to recall the fun you used to experience - laugh and be playful. Just start to watch all those adult feelings of stress begin to take flight!

**What’s in it for parents?** Simply put, the immune system receives a big boost (exactly what humans need during a virus threat).

**6. Include Imagination:** Dreaming and imagining are great tools for brain neuroplasticity for both adults and children.

**Getting practical:** A good dose of pretend play with your child does those brain cells a whole lot of good (for both you and your child). Choose a toy that lends itself to this purpose, such as a pretend phone. Try out different voices and enter into the imaginary space. Let yourself go and relive the joy of ’just playing.’

 **What’s in it for parents?** Scientists know that neurons that fire together wire together – play routines create a pathway of happiness. In essence, this is activated by oxytocin and, put simply, this means less stress all round and mutual benefits. It’s win-win.

**7.  Big up your brain:** Taking part in creative activities gives the brain a workout and keeps you young!

 **Getting practical:** Why not enjoy some really creative time with your child where you both have a go at a creative activity? Try something you played as a child (the positive feelings will all come flooding back).

 **What’s in it for parents?** Creativity really helps adult brains to keep active.

**8. Try the Triangle:** A ‘Toy Triangle’ is the perfect shape for play. 1. You 2. Your Child 3. The Toy – it’s a fool-proof recipe for success when playing.

 **Getting practical:** Find a toy that you can share with your child (age appropriate of course). It will create a ‘common ground’ forming a ‘triangle’ between you and this has the capacity to really bring you closer to each other.

**What’s in it for parents?** It will remind you of good times in your own childhood. It’s all about reducing stress and, in turn, that can only be a good thing for your relationship with your child. Sharing genuine interests with your child creates the magic in a relationship (this is termed interpersonal neurobiology that remarkably helps you configure each other’s physiology).

-ENDS-

**Full draft research paper available on request at** **J.harding@mdx.ac.uk****.**