

# The Science Behind

## Comfort Play & Teach



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Comfort, Play & Teach: A Positive Approach to Parenting was developed by Invest in Kids\* as a way to communicate what developmental science tells us about key strategies in parenting, in words that parents can easily understand. Compelling research evidence consistently emphasizes that when parents comfort, play with and teach their children in a positive manner it enhances children's development. This report documents the major academic research specialties that lend credence to the importance of "comfort," "play" and "teach" as a critical combination of parenting strategies.



### Comfort

Parents provide comfort to their children through words, physical presence and touch. Comfort is more than relief from distress. When it is provided with overall warmth, responsiveness and sensitivity to children's wide-ranging interests and needs, it is strongly related to infants' forming attachments to their parents and to toddlers' willingness to accept parents' guidance and requests.<sup>1</sup> The following areas of research demonstrate the importance of **comfort** as a key parenting strategy.

- **Research on "attachment":** Attachment refers to the emotional relationship between parents and children,<sup>2</sup> and more specifically the extent to which parents effectively provide a "secure base" to their children from which to explore and test the world around them.<sup>3</sup> In general, much of this body of research shows that "parental sensitivity and emotional availability foster attachment security and that such security provides an important foundation for children's healthy psychological development."<sup>4</sup> Several researchers document links between components of attachment and positive outcomes. For example, a secure attachment to parents is related to the mother's ability to read her child's signals and cues, and respond to these cues appropriately;<sup>5</sup> and parent's emotional availability and responsiveness is associated with higher levels of self-esteem in young children.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the positive effects of a secure attachment have been observed in many cultures.<sup>7</sup>

In general, attachment studies show that parents who respond promptly, reliably and appropriately to their babies' signals of physical and emotional distress give babies a good message from the start – their parents will be there for them.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the research indicates parents who show prompt, sensitive and effective responses to their infant's distress are believed to modulate the infant's immediate arousal and to act as a learning experience for the infant.

- **Research on maternal depression:** A depressed or emotionally unavailable mother typically does not provide adequate attention or stimulation to her infant, and does not have the ability to provide comfort to her baby when needed. During early interactions with their newborns, depressed mothers typically look at their

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\* Invest in Kids was a national charitable organization which officially disbanded in 2010. Invest in Kids content is now hosted jointly by The Phoenix Centre for Children and Families, Infant Mental Health Promotion (IMHP), and Health Nexus.

and they are more likely to display anger and disengagement and fewer playful behaviours with their infants.”<sup>9</sup> Over time the lack of attention and the negative emotion expressed by depressed parents affects their children’s ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour. A baby whose parent has been unresponsive is frequently angry because the parent’s inaccessibility may be painful and frustrating. Further, because of uncertainty about the parent’s responsiveness, the infant may be apprehensive and readily upset by stressful situations.<sup>10</sup> A frequent result is that infants become depressed, too. Infants of depressed mothers have been found to display more negative emotions and “zoning out” behaviours, as well as low positive emotions.<sup>11</sup>

• **Research on discipline and parenting style:** The research literature supports linkages between positive child outcomes and positive parenting behaviour, specifically, high levels of warmth and positive regard, low levels of punitive/angry behaviour and more effective child management techniques.<sup>12</sup> There is considerable support for the notion that hostile negative parental emotion, which is an extreme lack of comfort, especially if intense and directed at the child, is associated with the child’s low quality of social functioning and low levels of understanding of emotion.<sup>13</sup>



## Play

**Play** is the “work of children” and parents are an essential play “partner” for their children. When parents play with their children, they learn to explore and discover the world and their role in it.

• **Research on Language Development:** According to linguists, playfulness is a natural part of learning to communicate, and has been identified as being “species-specific” for humans, and critical to learning how to integrate language into self and social context. From this point of view, the human vocal tract is the first naturalistic toy and musical instrument, as babies babble, shriek and experiment with all the sounds they can produce. It is important for parents to provide rhythmical games of sound, which is crucial for the onset of babbling and subsequent speech, because syllables are considered the minimal rhythmic unit of most languages of the world.<sup>14</sup> Also, as part of capturing their infant’s attention, parents seem to naturally adjust the pitch of their voice and the rhythm of their speech (called “parentese” or “infant-directed speech”). Babies are drawn to the special properties of this kind of speech more than ordinary adult-like speech.<sup>15</sup> Research shows that parent’s provision of music, rhythm and play are very important pre-speech enhancements for helping children learn to communicate. The to- and-fro of the playfulness of learning language cements the parent/child relationship in uniquely human ways.

Once the child has the rudiments of speech underway, research shows that when parents play with their children and during this play name objects, ask questions and use a variety of words, this enhances children’s language development. In addition, children whose parents respond to when they initiate communication and play reach language acquisition milestones earlier than other children.<sup>16</sup> This leads to a child’s ability to interact with others which leads to enhanced social skills with playmates.

• **Research on “Adult-mediated play”:** When parents play with children it allows them to safely experiment with emotions and behaviours that may not be appropriate to express in “real life”,<sup>17</sup> and to learn about real situations without being threatened. For instance, playing peek-a-boo allows infants, who have not yet learned that parents are still present even though the baby cannot see them, to experience “separation” and “reunion” while also teaching children a sense of control over the situation being out-of-contact with his/her parents, which is threatening to infants and toddlers.<sup>18</sup>

Parent/child play appears to be especially powerful when children are still too young to play with other children.<sup>19</sup> The exchanges that occur during parent-child play based on taking turns, engaging someone’s attention and terminating a play, allows infants learn to establish and maintain contact with another person, to appreciate interpersonal communication and learn what is expected and in social interactions. These set the stage for more complex forms of interaction.<sup>20</sup> There is also evidence that mothers’ responsiveness to their infants’ emotions during this kind of play predicts earlier achievement of language milestones.<sup>21</sup>

There is also evidence that playing with adults helps children learn to persevere at a challenging task and promotes feelings of self-efficacy,<sup>22</sup> and it is well-established that play with adults helps children do better

than they would on their own.<sup>23</sup> When they play with their mothers, infants and toddlers display more complex, diverse, sophisticated, frequent and sustained play than when they play by themselves.<sup>24</sup>

- **Research on Maternal and Paternal play:** In absolute terms, most studies suggest that mothers play with their children more than fathers, and fathers still spend a small proportion of their time with their children in play.<sup>25</sup> However, it is thought that because play is prominent in father-child interaction (particularly boisterous, stimulating, emotionally arousing play), fathers' playfulness and relative novelty makes them especially salient to their children.<sup>26</sup> In our society a reasonably consistent gender-based pattern of play has emerged: fathers are tactile and physical, and mothers tend to be verbal, didactic and toy mediated in their play.<sup>27</sup> Research shows fathers who exhibit high levels of physical play with their children, and elicit high levels of pleasure from their children during the play sessions, have children who are popular with their peers. Boys, whose fathers were both highly physical during play and low in directiveness about how to play, received the highest popularity ratings. Thus, boys who interact with a physically playful father and at the same time have an opportunity to regulate the pace and tempo of the interaction themselves, as with low-directive fathers, learn how to recognize and send appropriate emotional signals during social relations.<sup>28</sup>

- **Research on Unstructured Play:** A recent review of research on free, unstructured play demonstrates the importance for children to have opportunities to engage in this type of play. It has unique benefits in that it leads to incidental learning in many areas, including language development, motor skills, social and emotional development, and problem-solving. This means that play, not learning, is the goal of the activity, but learning nevertheless occurs naturally over time. For parents and other caregivers, this means for example that children need to be provided with "free time" to engage in spontaneous play, a range of materials with which to play, and opportunities for outdoor play.<sup>29</sup>



## Teach

**Teach** is how parents help their children learn, both intellectually and interpersonally. When parents teach their children, they learn communicate, solve problems and how to relate to others.

- **Research on Cognitive Development:**

- **Research on Speech Development:** Speech must be learned from scratch. Parents take the lead in teaching children language. The primary parental method of teaching babies about the world is based on conversational interchange rather than on some systematic stimulation.<sup>30</sup> One of the ways this is accomplished by what is called "scaffolding" – where an adult observes what a child knows and then shows the child the next step in complexity. Many believe this is one of the fundamental ways in which a child's higher mental functions are formed -- through mediated activities shared with a more experienced parent.<sup>31</sup> Parents' role in scaffolding is crucial in learning grammar, vocabulary, verbal expression and memory.

- **Research on Literacy and reading to children:** Research shows that parents do not need to create an "academic" environment to prepare children for reading. Rather, it is the integration of rich language into everyday life, through book reading, rhyme-singing, dinnertime conversations, and looking at the print in storybooks and other household items that has beneficial effects.<sup>32</sup> The more children are exposed to high-quality language and literacy by their parents during the early years, the more ready they are to learn to read when they start school.

Specifically parental reading of books to their children and, importantly, talking with them about the book and the story, fosters a love for books and contributes to the development of children's vocabulary. Familiarizing children with print (by pointing it out in books, on signs, and by playing with alphabet blocks or magnets, etc.) also contributes to preparing children for formal reading instruction.<sup>33</sup>

There are additional literacy benefits when parents teach their children by encouraging them to tell stories. This prepares children for reading because creating narratives helps children learn about characters, how to organize sequences of events (what happens next?) and dialogue.

– **Research on numeracy** – There is evidence that when parents use the words “1, 2, 3” and talk about facts involving numbers, such as “1+1=2” with their children, such children do better on early mathematical achievement tests.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, when parents play board games such as snakes and ladders, use rhymes with numbers in them and read books featuring numbers, it improves children’s knowledge of number sequencing and recognition of number patterns compared to children whose parents do not provide these opportunities.<sup>35</sup> When parents play games that allow children to see the relationship between quantities, counting and formal symbols, such as games where preschoolers move their bodies on numbered paths, or when parents show children how to read a thermometer and how it relates to hot and cold, or what dots on the dice mean to a child’s progress around the board in a game, such activities are beneficial for children’s numeracy development and they perform better in math during the first years of school.<sup>36</sup>

• **Research on Social Development:** Through teaching, parents are a major influence on how children connect social and mental processes in general, and come to remember events and their place in them, as well as their understanding of themselves and their emotions.<sup>37</sup>

– **Research on pro-social behaviour:** Parents play a critical role in teaching their children how to behave in pro-social ways. Authoritative parents, who are generally warm and supportive, but who also encourage and respect the child’s autonomy, use constructive disciplinary techniques such as re-orientation and instruction, and set and enforce high standards of behavior are likely to rear prosocial children<sup>38</sup> who also perform well in school.<sup>39</sup> The combination of parental warmth and teaching, accompanied by a fundamental respect for the child is potent in shaping pro-social behaviour.

– **Research on “Social Referencing”:** *Infants* at about one year of age begin to deliberately search for and use expressions from parents and others (facial, vocal, gestural) to help clarify how they should respond to novel or ambiguous people and objects. This is called “social referencing.” Parents may not realize it, but they are powerful teachers of their infants in this way. They teach not only actual behaviour, but young children become fairly good consumers of emotional information from their parents and learn from it how to guide themselves.<sup>40</sup>

– **Research on aggression:** Children are at their most aggressive during toddlerhood -- they hit, bite, shove, grab, pull hair, and take things away from other children.<sup>41</sup> This is a natural tendency, and with appropriate parental teaching, this behaviour tends to decline over time for most children. Early childhood is, therefore, coming to be viewed by many researchers as a particularly sensitive period for parents to teach their children acceptable social behaviour, how to regulate aggression,<sup>42</sup> and set clear limits.

For about 5-10% of children, aggressive behaviour does not decline after toddlerhood, and these children, without appropriate parental intervention, often continue to have problems with aggression throughout their lives. The parents of these children need to take an even larger role in teaching their children, and research shows the parents of these children benefit greatly from being taught some very specific behaviour shaping strategies to use consistently with their children to reduce the aggressive behaviour.<sup>43</sup>

– **Research on “compliance and internalization of parental values”:** Teaching is a root component of children’s learning to comply with their parent’s requests and coming to internalize the social values. In several studies, the children who were more able to comply with requests and directions when parents were out of sight were more willing for their mothers to teach them, and their mothers were similarly eager to teach them.<sup>44</sup> Mothers who avoided the teaching role had children who were less likely to follow their parent’s requests when their parent was not present. Such children had not adopted their parent’s value as their own.

– **Research on “Emotion coaching”:** Most mothers talk about emotions with very young babies and toddlers. (“You’re a happy baby!” “You made your sister sad.”)<sup>45</sup> Parental discussion of emotions has been called “emotion coaching”<sup>46</sup>, and it is a form of parental teaching. Parents who are good emotion coaches have children who are physiologically better regulated -- they are not as likely to spin emotionally out of control. This, in turn, influences their ability to manage their social behaviour with friends. In homes where preschoolers discussed emotions with their parents, the preschoolers were rated by teachers as more cooperative, empathic and prosocial.

– **Research on emotion regulation:** Emotion regulation is emotional control and self-efficacious behaviour that is initiated from oneself, not in compliance with someone else’s wishes. It requires a certain autonomy and self-determination, and its development is an important goal of parenting, as parents ultimately want their children to be able to comfort themselves, control their own emotions, and more generally to think for themselves and act on their own ideas.

When children are forced to face situations and circumstances before they are ready, it creates a stress response that surpasses children’s ability to handle their emotions. The teaching role of the parent is crucial, and parents must decide how active a role to play. If parents play too active a teaching role in reducing their children’s mild distress, it undermines the children’s ability to regulate their emotions themselves<sup>47</sup> When parents minimize children’s negative emotions or respond punitively to negative emotions in a stressful situation, children may suppress their emotions in the short-term but do not seem to learn to regulate them effectively. This leads to greater externalizing of their emotions more when they get older.<sup>48</sup> “Emotional self-regulation is facilitated by involved, responsive parenting but also by styles that tolerate and support emotional expression and set up situations that allow the child opportunities to regulate their emotions more autonomously.”<sup>49</sup> Self-regulation of behaviour leads to self-confidence, confidence in others and sense of security.

## What a child will be depends on you and me.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Crill Russell, 2003, p. 27
- 2 Cummings & Cummings, 2002, p. 35
- 3 Waters & Cummings, 2000
- 4 Cummings & Cummings, 2002, p. 53
- 5 Ainsworth, 1978.
- 6 Loeb et al., 1980.
- 7 Bowlby, 1973; van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999
- 8 Bornstein, 1995
- 9 Field, 1995, p. 95
- 10 Bornstein, 1995, p.18
- 11 Field, 1995, p. 96
- 12 Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995; Lamb, 1997.
- 13 Crill Russell, 2003, p.16
- 14 Crill Russell, 2003, p.15
- 15 Fernald, 1985
- 16 Bornstein et al., 1992; Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1994; Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein & Baumwell, 2001.
- 17 Bruner, 1972; Singer, 1995
- 18 Fernald & O'Neill, 1993
- 19 MacDonald, 1993; Power, 2000
- 20 Bruner, 1978, 1983; Vandell & Wilson, 1987
- 21 Nicely et al., 1999
- 22 Grolnick, Frodi, & Bridges, 1984.
- 23 Vygotsky, 1978
- 24 Bornstein, Haynes, O'Reilly, & Painter, 1996; Fiese, 1990.
- 25 Crill Russell, 2003, p. 41, 42
- 26 Lamb, 1997, p. 5.
- 27 Bornstein, 1995, p. 20
- 28 Gottman, 1997, p. 168
- 29 Canadian Council on Learning, 2006
- 30 Crill Russell, 2003, p. 14
- 31 Vygotsky, 1986
- 32 Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999
- 33 Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999
- 34 Blevins-Knabe & Musun-Miller, 1996
- 35 Ainley, 1990; Young-Loveridge, 2004; Peters, 1998
- 36 Griffin, 2004; Griffin & Case, 1997
- 37 Crill Russell, 2003, p. 16.
- 38 Baumrind, 1971, 1993, in Eisenberg & Valiente, 2002
- 39 Chao and Willms, 2002
- 40 Crill Russell, 2003, p. 17
- 41 Tremblay, 2000.
- 42 Broidy et al., 2003; Nagin et al., 1999
- 43 Webster-Stratton; Matthew Sanders; Patterson
- 44 Kochanska, Tjebkes, & Forman, 1998, p.1378
- 45 Crill Russell, 2003, p. 17
- 46 Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, 1997; Gottman, 1998
- 47 Grolnick, Kurowski, McMenamy, Rivkin, & Bridges, 1998
- 48 Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, Shepard, Guthrie, Murphy, & Reiser, 1999
- 49 Grolnick & Farkas, 2002

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