

Following Your Child's Lead

Parents can support their children's play and interactions during everyday activities by following their children's lead. Following a child's lead involves a child's participation in activities based on his or her interests, supporting the child's actions and interactions with materials and people in the activities, and supporting the child's choices when he or she wants to change the focus of interest. When parents follow their children's lead, they can help their children become more confident and capable play partners.

Watch a video of this Learning Guide

Learning Guide: Letting Your Child Take the Lead

- Observe your child to identify the toys, materials, activities, and people he or she finds interesting; the things that he spends a lot of time doing, chooses to do, and works hard at doing; and things that make him smile, laugh, or get excited. Provide opportunities for your child to be involved in the activities, play with the materials, and engage in interactions that interest him.
- During activities, notice when your child gets interested in something. Direct your attention to what captures her attention. Wait to let your child try to start an interaction with you or with toys or materials. See what your child will try to do on her own.
- Watch how your child uses or tries to use materials or interacts in the activity. Let your child explore or experiment with materials in his own way. For example, rather than stacking blocks, an infant or toddler might bang two blocks together to make a noise or a preschooler might use a block as a pretend telephone or car.
- Respond to what your child does by imitating him, commenting on his or her actions, or joining in his or her play. Then wait for your child to respond or interact with you or the materials again. Stay focused on what your child does and what your child seems to want to do. As long as your child is interested in an activity, encourage him to stay involved in what he is doing. Be sure to avoid trying to draw your child's attention to something different.
- Encourage your child to start to interact with you by getting at her level (for example get down on the floor with your child), looking directly at her, and showing interest in what she is doing. When your child does something to start to interact with you (for example, says something to you, makes a gesture to you), make sure your response is related to what your child said or did.
- When you respond to your child with a comment or action, be sure to stay on the same topic with what your child is saying and doing. Matching your child's behavior in this way lets her take the lead in an interaction, encourages her to stay involved with you, and build on what she is saying and doing.
- Watch for when your child seems to lose interest in an activity, material, or person and changes his focus to something or someone else. Shift your attention as your child shifts his attention to other things. Follow your child's lead in interactions throughout the day.

A Quick Peek Heather watched her daughter, Kaya, sit on the floor amid some of her favorite things—her toy cars, dollhouse furniture, and doll house. Heather joined Kaya, who exclaimed, “Vroom! Vroom,” and pushed a toy truck back and forth. She enthusiastically imitated Kaya's truck sounds. She watched Kaya push the truck into one of the bedrooms of the dollhouse, and to Kaya's delight, declared, “You parked it!” Kaya left the truck there and started picking up pieces of doll furniture and carefully placing them in the main living room of the dollhouse. Each time Kaya placed a piece of furniture, she named it, saying, “Bed. Toilet. Table.” Resisting the urge to tell Kaya the “correct” room for each item, Heather acknowledged each placement of furniture, “There's the bed. There's the table.” When Kaya put the sofa in the room and said, “Sofa,” Heather said, “There's the red sofa,” and smiled as Kaya repeated, “Red sofa.” They continued placing furniture in the dollhouse just as Kaya wanted. After a while, Kaya went back to the truck, pulling it out of its parking place and pushing it across the room. “There she goes!” called Heather.



You'll know the practice is working if ...

- Your child stays involved in play activities for longer periods of time
- Your child has fun and enjoys doing things his or her own way during activities
- Your child does more things on his or her own during activities

Learn more about following a child's lead from web-based resources such as this blog post from the Harbor Regional Center: [“How to Follow Your Child's Lead”](#)