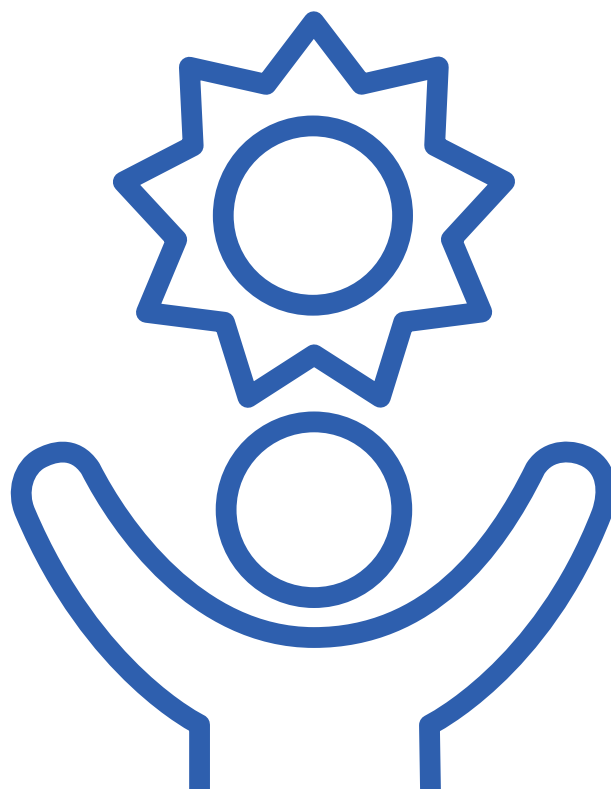


IPA Play in Crisis: support for parents and carers



IPA Play in Crisis: support for parents and carers



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RELAX AND
FORGET
WORRIES



MAKE SENSE OF
NEW EXPERIENCES AND
CHANGES IN THE WORLD



COPE WITH FEELINGS
THAT ARE DIFFICULT
OR FRIGHTENING

The world is coping with an unprecedented crisis. As we face the challenge of a world pandemic, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on health and the economy.

The coronavirus pandemic itself and governments' responses have had a significant impact on children around the world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) identifies the fundamental needs of children, and these include their right to play.

There is a need to support children's right to play at this time, so we have developed the *IPA Play in Crisis: support for parents and carers* resources.

Each page provides parents and carers with information and ideas so they can support their child's play. We've included topics such as the importance of playing in crisis, and how to respond to children's play needs, through to issues that parents may be concerned about, like children playing with difficult themes of loss, death and loneliness.

The International Play Association recognises playing as a basic and vital part of the pleasure of childhood. We also see it as an essential part of all aspects of children's development. During crisis, play has a significant therapeutic role, helping children recover a sense of normality and joy.

The mission of the IPA is to protect, preserve and promote the child's right to play as a fundamental human right. We hope this resource will help fulfil that mission, and we encourage you to share it widely throughout your networks.

Together, we can ensure our children have the opportunities to play that are essential for them to thrive.

Robyn Monro Miller

President, IPA

April 2020

The importance of playing during a crisis



Playing helps children stay physically and mental well. It is an everyday part of a healthy and happy childhood. Play is just as important during a crisis like the current coronavirus pandemic. It helps your child manage their emotions and maintain a sense that everything is and can be ok.

During a crisis, playing is your child's way to:

- stay emotionally healthy
- stay physically active, getting some exercise
- relax and forget about worries
- make sense of any new experiences and changes in their world
- cope with feelings that are difficult or frightening.

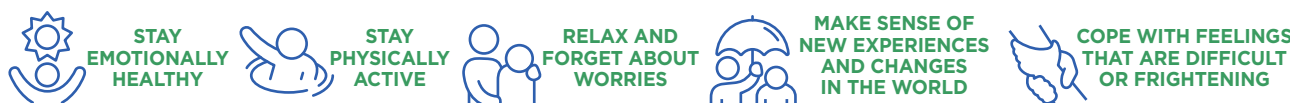
Playing at home

A great way for you to support the health, happiness and development of your child during the current crisis is to find ways they can play at home. Making time to play and have fun together is good for your relationship with your child and for your own mental wellbeing.

Playing can also protect your child from some of the negative impacts this crisis could have. For example:

- Playing is strongly linked to creativity - it involves imagination and problem solving.
- Playing helps young children develop by doing and talking. It is also how they learn to think.
- Playing may involve your child acting and repeating events - this is one way for them to understand what is happening.
- Acting their feelings helps your child come to terms with them and feel more in control.
- Playing allows your child to express anger and frustration safely without harming other people, or without getting harmed themselves.
- Playing allows your child to develop their own strengths and ability to cope.

Being at home for long periods of time and being physically separated from friends, families, routines and cherished places is a new situation for most of us. Playing is a natural and active process that can help us.



The *IPA play in crisis* series is designed to offer straightforward advice and suggestions to help you and your child keep playing through the coronavirus pandemic.

Supporting your child's play during a crisis



Children play naturally. Usually the most important things you can do to support this are giving your child enough space and time to play every day and having an understanding attitude. If your child sees that you are happy they're playing, they tend to enjoy it more.

During this coronavirus pandemic, your child is expected to be at home for long periods of time. They may be physically separated from friends, family, routines and places that are important to them. It is a new situation for them – and for most of us.

You might see your child playing in a different way. They may return to play they enjoyed when they were younger. They may play games that are linked to illness, loss or even death. Their play might show feelings such as frustration, boredom or confusion.

Responding to your child's play

Playing is one way children deal with stress and cope with the situation they're in. When children play, they are working out what they think and how to respond.

Unless your child seems distressed or stuck in their play, you can usually be reassured that it's part of how they are coping.

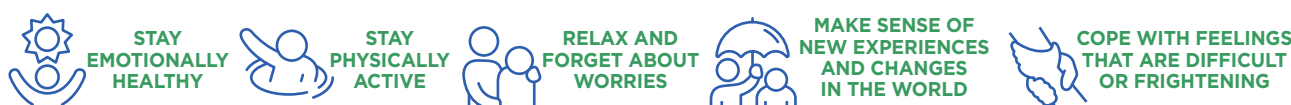
However, your child might rely on you more than usual to make sure they have things to play with and space and time for them to play every day. Sometimes they might need extra attention to feel safe and cared for.

Examples of how you can support your child's play, without leading or taking over.

- **Wait to be invited to play.** If your child is happily playing, it's fine to leave them to it.
- **Help protect your child's play from interruptions.** If your child is absorbed in playing, avoid switching on the TV or games console, asking questions or asking them to stop for other activities.
- **Let your child explore and make mistakes.** Let your child use trial and error and their own ideas without feeling foolish or judged.
- **Let your children develop skills at their own pace.** It's tempting to step in to help your child when they find something difficult but that's how they learn.
- **Let children choose the themes of their games.** Even if the themes seem difficult or upsetting, it's their play.

These are general tips for supporting your child's play. Trust your own judgement.

Your child might like you to play with them or simply be nearby, so they feel safe and cared for. They may also like some privacy while they play – for example, if they're not used to spending so much time indoors with you.



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Thinking about your child's play

Being at home with your child for longer amounts of time than usual gives you a chance to understand how they play. You can get into a routine that works for you both. It's also a chance for you to enjoy being playful – and for you to benefit from playing, too.

When children play it isn't always the same. Sometimes your child might like to play alone. Sometimes they might want to play with others. They might like to play online, with other people in your house, or with a pet, doll or teddy bear as their companion.

Your child might sometimes enjoy active, energetic play. At other times they might choose something quieter or creative. These are all natural ways of playing.

Having a chance to pay attention to how your child plays can be a lovely part of spending time together. It helps you:

- get to know your child better
- get ideas about other things they might enjoy doing
- recognise clues about how they're feeling
- get into a routine of being together that is relaxed and enjoyable for you both.

Some tips for responding to play

- **Pause** before you get involved in your child's play.
- **Look and listen** to what is happening. What is your child doing?
- **Think** about how they are playing. What would happen if you suddenly joined in? If your child is safe, do you need to join in?
- **Decide** whether to act. After you've paused, looked, listened and thought, you'll have a better idea of whether your child would like you to join in.
- **Reflect.** Afterwards, you could think about how your involvement changed your child's playing. For example, did it stop them playing? Did it add more fun? Did it reassure them?

Children usually seem to know when another child wants to play or be left alone. Adults might need to remember how to work this out. One way of knowing when you've got it right is to tell your child they can ask you to go away!

Your child might have different ways of showing you they'd like you to come and play with them – not just by saying it. For example, your child might:

- make a funny face at you
- tap you on the shoulder and run away
- cuddle into you
- hang about near you
- do something annoying to get your attention
- bring toys over to show you.

There are different ways you can join in. It could mean playing with your child, but it might also mean:

- making a place to play, which could be as small as a cardboard box or a space on the sofa
- tuning in to the emotion in your child's play and helping them work it out with simple playthings from around the house
- singing a song, playing some music or telling a story
- finding some things to play with – for example, some sheets to make a den, or some pots and pans for a pretend cafe.



STAY EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY



STAY PHYSICALLY ACTIVE



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Playing that involves difficult themes such as loss, illness and death



Children get lots of good things from play – like fun, relaxation, excitement and companionship. Play is also an important way for children to develop their ability to cope when things are difficult, scary or confusing.

Adults sometimes find it painful to see or hear children playing when it involves themes like loss, death, illness and loneliness. You might find it brings difficult emotions to the surface for you. Or you might feel it's disrespectful.

It is natural to want to distract and protect your child if their play involves difficult themes. It might help to remember that children still need and want to play during this coronavirus pandemic.

This kind of play can help your child to:

- come to terms with a difficult situation
- manage their emotions
- feel that things are under control
- ask any questions they may have
- build up their ability to cope with other challenging things they'll face in life.

Examples of playing at home that involves difficult themes

- Acting out scenes your child has seen or heard at home, on TV or the internet – for example, hospital wards, funerals, people in distress, people helping each other, politicians making announcements.
- Re-enacting events and changing the outcome – for example, playing that someone starts to recover from an illness.
- Playing at finding solutions to big problems – for example, involving superheroes with names linked to the virus.
- Creating make-believe characters representing things like the virus, scientists or death.
- Explaining what is happening to a teddy bear, doll or sibling, or telling them off for not following new rules.
- Acting out their feelings – such as anger, fear or loneliness – and making it funny, exaggerated or exciting.
- Acting the death or funeral of a loved one to make it feel real.

Playing helps your child let feelings out – instead of holding them inside

Although these types of play may feel upsetting, it may help to remember why your child is playing this way. These types of play create opportunities for you to:

- understand more about how your child is feeling and coping
- spot if they have misunderstood anything – for example how the virus is spread, how long the pandemic will last
- provide lots of reassurance
- share with them rituals and traditions from your background, faith or heritage. These might relate to things like caring for people, funeral rites, celebration of life
- give them age-appropriate information to help them understand better.

Our feelings can influence how we respond to children's play. Your child's play might make you feel uncomfortable, but it can be important for them to play like this.



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Managing play at home that feels noisy or destructive



Children sometimes use play to:

- work through difficult emotions
- test how you will respond
- get a sense of satisfaction or control.

Your child is living through a very new experience which is confusing and frightening for adults, too.

Playing is a very important way for your child to understand – and come to terms with – what they are hearing, seeing and feeling. It can be hard to feel like choices have been taken away, or to have little way of knowing how long this situation is going to continue.

What might play look like when children have scary, confusing feelings?

Playing is one of the ways children adapt to change. The way they play may change – it may be loud and destructive, or quiet and calm. Here are some examples of playing that you might see:

- Being very noisy – for example, needing to shout, sing loudly, bash on drums, or hit things noisily.
- Taking frustration out on toys or objects – for example, punching pillows or throwing a teddy around.
- Destroying something they have made – for example, tearing up a picture or knocking down towers.
- Withdrawing into a small space – for example, a cardboard box, a space under the bed, a den made from sheets and pillows.
- Play-fighting and ‘rough and tumble’ play with you or their siblings.

Older children and teenagers may play like this, too. It is important that we remember that older children still need time and space to play.

How can I manage this kind of play at home?

It can help simply to know that this is your child learning to cope with a new situation. However, when you are cooped up at home it can also be difficult to handle.

- Speak to your neighbours if you are worried about how the sound of this kind of play affects them. Some people get a lot of joy when they hear children playing, but others may feel it disturbs their sleep or other activities. Some compromise and consideration might be needed on both sides.
- Find things for your child to play with that you don't mind getting torn or messed up – for example, old sheets, cardboard boxes and cushions.
- Get some play dough or other modelling clay for pummelling, squeezing and poking. If you have some spare flour and oil, you could make your own play dough.
- If your child is old enough, talk with them about when it's ok to make lots of noise and when they need to be quieter.
- Give your child something to make a lot of noise with – for example, dustbin lids, drumsticks or pots and pans. Let them make as much noise as they want for a set period of time – as much as you and neighbours can cope with – explaining that when the time is up they should pack things away.
- Let your child know that you understand they need to play. Tell them you want to help them play without causing unnecessary damage harm to themselves, your home and other people.



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Messy play at home



Playing at all ages can be messy and fun. But when you and your child are at home together for a while, it might be more difficult to cope with.

Being messy is a natural part of playing. It involves:

- using all your senses to explore what things look, feel, smell and sound like
- being creative and imaginative
- learning about what things do – for example, what happens when colours mix or how water trickles or how bubbles float
- feeling satisfaction from squishing things together, taking them apart, and making a mess just for the sake of it
- having fun splashing, giggling and tickling.

Messy play about the coronavirus

During the current situation, your child might use messy play to:

- explore their feelings about germs, viruses and how these are passed from one place or person to another
- create models or images of what they think a virus looks like or how it acts, maybe giving it a personality.

If your child is doing this, you can help by:

- allowing them to play freely, so they can work things out in a way that helps them come to terms with what's happening
- using their play as a starting point for conversations about the virus and its effects.

Tips for dealing with messy play at home

It can be harder to deal with mess around the house – or to wash and dry clothes – when you are having to stay at home so much. And children may worry about adding stress to the family, too.

The important thing is to try to find a balance that works for your family. Here are some suggestions:

- Let your child know you don't mind them getting wet or a bit messy when they play.
- Keep some old clothes that you're happy for your child to wear when they get messy.
- Involve your child when you're cleaning up and sorting out messy clothes and toys.
- Cover the floor or table with old cloths or newspaper.
- Discuss with your child where it's ok to be messy in your home and where it isn't.
- Remember that bathrooms are usually perfect for messy and wet play.



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Things to play with around your home

There are lots of things around most people's homes that can be played with. Although you might think play means games and toys, children can play with lots of things that encourage their imagination and ingenuity. For example, things like cardboard boxes or old sheets can be played with in different ways.

Getting ready

- Make sure things are properly washed and dried before your child plays with them.
- Use your judgement about fragile things. Think about whether you'd mind if they got torn, messed up or broken.
- Avoid plastic bags and wrapping because of the risk of suffocation, especially if there are small children around.
- Avoid small things such as bottle lids or shells that young children could choke on.
- Remember the official hygiene advice and help your child to do the same.
- Check for sharp edges.

Here are some ideas of things you can find around the house for your child play with...

Packaging and recycling

You can offer your child some of the things that are often thrown away or recycled:

- Silver foil, aluminium food trays, cellophane wrapping
- Plastic bottles and containers
- Cardboard boxes – for example, cereal boxes, eggboxes, toilet roll tubes or packing cases.

Household items

Many things you use at home every day can be great for playing:

- Sheets, duvets, pillows, old clothes
- Chairs, tables, cardboard boxes
- Pots, pans, wooden spoons
- Papers, chalk, balloons, paint
- String, elastic bands, pegs, paper clips.

Activities

- Make models, puppets, shields and musical instruments.
- Take out frustration by squashing pillows or stamping cardboard boxes until they are flat.
- Draw pictures on card and cut them into jigsaw puzzles.
- Set up pretend shops, schools, kitchens, banks, post offices, beauty salons, hospitals and cafes.
- Collect and sort things to play with in water.
- Make dens, shelters and cubby holes.
- Play at dressing up, put on shows, make up soap operas and dramas.
- Make a small indoor garden, planting seeds and watching them grow.
- Invent new board games.

Items from nature

Natural things such as seed pods, shells, plants, twigs, sticks, pebbles and stones have always been used for play. You may already be able to find some around the house or you might be able to collect some and bring them inside to play with.

- Only collect small amounts of items from nature outdoors.
- Don't damage plants, trees, habitats, nests etc.
- If you can, return items to nature after you have played with them.



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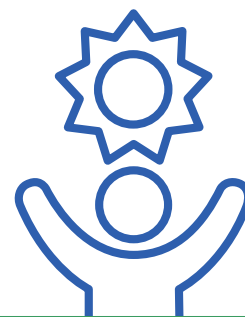


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Make the most of your time outside

Going outdoors is good for our mental and physical health. It can relieve family pressures caused by spending so much time indoors together, too.

Take care

You may be allowed to go out to exercise for a short time each day. Guidance varies from country to country and may change as the coronavirus pandemic goes on. Always follow the official guidance where you are.

- If you go out, stay two metres (six feet) away from other people at all times.
- Wash your hands as soon as you get home.
- Do not meet up with people you don't live with – even friends and other family members.
- Avoid exercising in busy places where you can't keep two metres away from other people.

Make the most of being outdoors

Whether your time outside is on city streets, in a park or in the countryside, nature is all around you.

- Take some time to pause, look around and talk with your child about what you see and feel.
- Hug a tree, stand up on a rock, find weeds in cracks in the pavement.
- Learn the names of the plants, trees and birds you find in your area. How many can you spot when you are out?
- Do some weather watching and forecasting – can you guess what the weather will be like later in the day, tomorrow or next week? How about keeping a weather diary with drawings and notes?
- Take photos, do drawings, write poems, tell stories.
- Forage. Learn about the things you can eat that grow wild in your local environment.
- Choose one place to visit regularly – for example, a tree, a bush, a stream, a canal – and watch how it changes day by day. Are leaves and buds unfurling? Are insects coming to live there?
- Go out at different times of day if you are allowed to by local regulations – early morning, sunrise, noon, dusk, night-time. What do you and your child notice about the sun and the moon, shadows and light effects?

Simple games to play while you are out

- Games like 'I spy with my little eye'
- Treasure hunts
- Jumping on the spot, hopping, walking backwards, doing handstands, trying a cartwheel, jumping in puddles, chasing shadows
- Storytelling, playing imaginative and fantasy games
- Drawing with chalk on pavements or sidewalks
- Badminton and games with bats, balls and hoops
- Games your child plays at school or nursery – you can ask them to teach you
- Taking small playthings from home – for example, toy animals or cars you can play with outdoors
- Balancing games – for example, on kerbs or lines on the pavement
- Collecting things like pebbles, sticks, and leaves that you can take home and play with.



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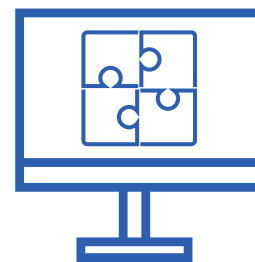
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Internet and screen-based activities and play... finding a balance



Most families want to find a reasonable balance between time spent on screens and time for other types of play and activities, including family time.

If you have access to screens at home during the coronavirus pandemic, they can be a way for your child to:

- keep in touch with friends, social groups and family
- share experiences, concerns and ideas
- have a laugh and enjoy themselves
- get absorbed in a game that takes their full attention
- take part in creative activities
- access information, news and advice.

It's understandable to relax some of the usual rules in the current crisis. But spending all day on screens can have negative effects, as well as providing your child with important opportunities and experiences. For example, your child may find it difficult to get to sleep, or they may miss out on other activities.

Some ways to help your child find a healthy balance

- **Show you understand and are interested.** Let them know you understand that playing on screens isn't all good or bad. You could try playing some of their games, or get them to teach you about apps they like.
- **Keep moving.** Encourage your child to take regular breaks, rather than sitting still or lying down for too long. They can walk around, and do star jumps or press-ups to increase their heart rate.
- **Get outside.** If possible, encourage them to get some outside exercise.
- **Look out of the window.** It's good for your child's eyes to change focus by looking at the horizon or distant buildings.
- **Try keeping your mealtimes screen-free.** You'll have time to talk and appreciate your food.
- **Try to avoid screens before bedtime.** This will make it easier to fall asleep, and to get up in the morning.
- **Plan together.** Discuss with your child how long they feel it's ok to use screens each day. Get them to make a plan, and ask what would help them stick to it.
- **Try to avoid repeatedly checking updates on the coronavirus pandemic.** Try making a conscious decision to turn off or mute notifications. And try only checking the news a couple of times a day.
- **Remember.** Older children might enjoy doing things they did when they were younger or playing with favourite old toys. This can give them a sense of reassurance and security.

Babies and very young children

Babies can be attracted to screens. This is especially true if people around them are using screens. But the most important things babies and very young children need for their development don't come from screens. They are about human contact – for example:

- being held, cuddled, tickled and stroked
- gazing around, focusing their eyes on different shapes, faces and distances
- people making eye contact with them and smiling
- touching things with their hands, feet, mouths and bodies
- people talking to them using baby talk, rhymes and lullabies.



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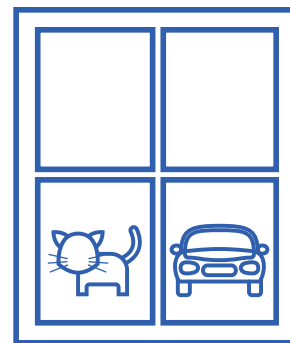
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Playing when you cannot go outside your home



The coronavirus pandemic has created unusual and difficult experiences for children and families. One of these is not being able to go outside.

This can be especially difficult if you feel your home is crowded, or don't have much privacy from neighbours.

Feeling stressed or upset is completely understandable. It's important to look after yourself and to find ways to relax.

Here are some suggestions that might help.

- Remember your child doesn't need you to be the perfect parent. They need to know you love and care for them.
- If your child is playing happily it's fine to let them play while you rest and have some downtime.
- It's ok for your child to be bored sometimes. They don't need you to entertain them all the time.
- When you play with your child, try to forget about other concerns. Concentrate on enjoying playing with them.
- It's ok to say you've played enough, that you need a rest, or have to do something else.

Playing is a way of being connected to the world. Here are some suggestions of things you can play at home.

Games to play looking out of the window

- Count the number of cars or cats or people you can see.
- Make up stories about what you see. For example, what is the cat planning to do? What's their name? What would the world look like if you were the cat?
- Can you see the streetlights going on in the evening and off in the morning? Can you hear the moment the birds start to sing in the morning and settle down for the night?
- At night-time, look for stars and the moon, reflections and shadows, birds, bats and other wildlife moving around.

Always be very careful of your child's safety when they're near windows.

Bring some nature into your home

- Look around your home for things to play with made from natural materials - wooden spoons, wicker baskets, cotton, silk, pebbles or feathers.
- Try growing a small indoor garden in pots near a window. You could grow herbs to smell and taste, or seedlings for flowers.
- Try making an arty garden on a tray making trees, plants and birds from scrap materials like wrapping paper, tissue paper, sweet wrappers and cardboard.
- Learn to identify birds and insects using a book or looking online.

Try to stay active

It can be hard to keep physically active at home, but there are lots of benefits to using up energy – for example, improving your mood (and your child's) and sleeping better.

- Put on some music and dance – try funny dancing, slow motion, follow my leader or freestyle.
- Exercises – turn your room into a gym. Try some sit-ups, running on the spot or balancing on one leg. Ask your child to show you exercises they do at school.
- Rough and tumble play – play wrestling creates a burst of energy and fun. You can make things safer by moving breakable objects, or you can put a duvet on the floor.

Making space

Sometimes your child might need to play alone or prefer some privacy when they play. Equally, there will be times when you need some space too.

- Find some items to make a den or a tent. It can be as simple as putting a bed sheet over a table with the fabric hanging down the sides so your child can play underneath.
- A large cardboard box is a perfect plaything for children.
- Make a cosy corner or a squasy circle with a pile of pillows and cushions.
- Change the mood in a room by switching the main light off and playing in the dark, or just with the light from the street. Try making shadows with torches or a small lamp.
- Talk to your child and explain that you sometimes need a little bit of quiet and time on your own just like they do. Even if you can't be in different rooms, you can help your child learn that there are times when they should try to play quietly.

Other pages in the IPA series offer guidance and ideas for playing at home during the coronavirus pandemic. They include:

- play dealing with difficulty themes (death, loss and loneliness etc.)
- coping with noisy and messy play
- ideas for play around your home.



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