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# WATCH ME PLAY!

## Manual



## Part 1: Introduction

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Cover illustration by Rashawn Fergus

## What is Watch Me Play?

Watch Me Play! is a simple way of helping babies and young children that can be done at home by parents or carers, or by parents or carers together with an infant mental health clinician. It takes twenty minutes to do. Doing Watch Me Play! every day is helpful for some children; for others, every other day or twice a week works well.

Parents and carers who do Watch Me Play! help their child to communicate. They may have the pleasure of seeing their child's confidence and imagination grow. As a child's play skills develop through Watch Me Play! , caregivers can get a clearer idea about what is going on for their child. Parents and carers can also learn more about their child's interests, experiences and any worries they may have.

When there has been a lot of family stresses or health worries, some babies and young children may need extra help to express themselves. Children who have been looked after by different caregivers are especially likely to benefit from a consistent and regular play routine with the undivided attention of their caregiver. Babies and young children who have had changes in their lives need to feel that they are in the minds of their caregivers. Being confident that adults accept their feelings and are interested in their thoughts helps children of all ages to feel contained.

Watch Me Play! can help to provide reassurance for babies and young children who have not always been able to rely on adults. It may be harder for children who have had big changes in their lives to follow their own thought processes and to focus on a single activity. Some children are more able to play when they are in a quiet space with the full attention of their caregiver. They can be helped by being provided with simple toys that let them use their imagination and are appropriate for their developmental stage.

A parent comments: 'My child is calmer and I feel more confident.'

A social worker comments: 'Watch Me Play! helps adults to see the world through the child's eyes.'

## How to do Watch Me Play

### *1 Preparing*

The caregiver plans a twenty minute time when they can give their child their full attention in a quiet space with some age-appropriate toys and materials.

### *2 Child led-play*

The child takes the lead and the parent or carer allows the child to play freely, choosing what they are going to do.

### *3 Watching the child play*

The parent or carer gives the child their full attention during the 20 minute Watch Me Play time.

### *4 Talking to the child about their play*

The parent or carer talks to the child in simple words about what they see the child doing.

### *5 Talking with another adult about the child's play*

The parent or carer talks with another adult about what they saw the child doing- sometimes the same thing over and over again, sometimes something new. They also talk about how it felt to be with the child while they were playing.

### *Key points*

- Child-led play promotes development and learning
- Showing that you are interested helps your child to focus
- Watching closely helps you to remember what your child says and does
- Adults thinking together about what may be on a child's mind helps him or her to feel settled and contained

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

### ***Can I do Watch Me Play with my grand-child, my foster child, or as a nanny?***

*Yes ! every adult who is with the child regularly can help them develop by doing Watch Me Play! with them.*

### ***How old does my child need to be to do Watch Me Play with me?***

Watch Me Play! can be done from the first weeks of your baby's life up to the age of five or six, depending on the kind of play they enjoy. Copying an adult moving their eyebrows or their tongue is a game even very young babies can enjoy. Tickle games like 'Round and round the garden' can be exciting for growing babies. When your baby looks away or stops laughing, he or she may need a bit of down time before they're ready for the next round of interaction. Playing with rhyming words and singing songs helps with the beginnings of language learning. Playing with dolls and small animals allows young children to express feelings and try out new ideas. Role play games develop imagination and language skills and assist social skills such as turn-taking. Your child may also choose to draw, paint or make things or to look at books with you during their Watch Me Play! time.

## **Preparing**

Find a place in your home where you can turn off televisions, computers and phones.

Work out a regular time when you can give your child your full attention for twenty minutes.

Sit on or near the floor and tell your child how long you have got to watch him or her play.

Put away battery-operated toys during the Watch Me Play time. Choose simple, age-appropriate toys and books that let your child use their imagination.



In the last five minutes, give your child time to prepare for the end of the Watch Me Play! time. Help your child to be ready to finish by reminding them about doing Watch Me Play! again another time. Or you can help your child to move to a new activity by singing a song together or doing a little dance. Talk about what you are going to do next as you put the toys away. Show your child how you keep their toys ready for the next Watch Me Play! time in a special basket or box. Put your child's drawings and paintings in a folder or a special drawer.

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

### *I see my child playing all the time – why would I need to do Watch Me Play with her?*

Seeing your child play – and playing with your child- is helpful for your child – but doing Watch Me Play! is something extra. While watching your child play, you are also **talking** to your child about what he or she is choosing to do. You're not making suggestions or joining in with your child's play, unless they ask you to. And you're **noticing** what it's like for you to be with your child while they are playing. So it's a bit different from seeing your child play and playing with your child in the way you do throughout the day.

### *Can I do Watch me Play with my two children together?*

Many children struggle to share attention! There's something about one to one attention that can help children to focus and communicate. For families with two or more children, it's better to find a short time that can be just for each child, even if it's less than twenty minutes, while the other children are doing something else. Having your full attention even for this short time can help your child to settle at other times.

## Child led-play

The aim of Watch Me Play! is for your child to play freely, making their own choices, while you talk with him or her about what you see as they play. Try not to join in unless your child asks you to! If your child does ask you to join in, try to follow their lead. Leave the decisions and choices to your child during the Watch Me Play! time.

A parent comments:

*'This is the one area where the child does have some control, in their play.'*

A foster carer comments:

*'Now I enjoy tipping out the box, letting the child see all the toys and choose'.*

Help your child focus on his or her play by putting out a small number of toys and drawing materials, chosen for the age of your child. Find a quiet place with televisions and phones off. Let your child take the lead and choose what to do. Allow your child to get out all the toys you have prepared. Let him or her use the toys in any way they like that is safe. If toys are being thrown around, replace them with soft toys.



Give your full attention to whatever your child chooses to do. Show your interest by smiling and talking with your child about he or she is doing. Wait to tidy up until the end of the Watch Me Play time.

### ***What not to do during Watch Me Play!***

**X** *Teaching your child (This is red, this is blue; Show me the blue one)*

**X** *Correcting your child (That is not how you make a house)*

**X** *Directing your child (X: Why don't you do it like this?)*

**X** *Tidying up during the Watch Me Play! time*



## *Frequently Asked Questions*

### ***Why is child-led play important for development?***

Child-led play helps parents and carers to tune into their developing child. You'll get new ideas from your child as his or her imagination shows you what is on his or her mind. The looking and mirroring games that babies play are full of delight and discovery. They help infants and parents or carers to get to know each other and to share enjoyment. For infants, touching games such as Round and round the garden, Pat-a-cake or One potato-two potato are fun and they also help children to learn about their bodies.

Children need to develop the skills of exploration, co-ordination and communication before they are ready for school learning. Thinking about meaning is important for learning too: playing games that have a story reinforces the skills that are important for language and reading.

Exploratory play, making a mess or getting things 'wrong' are good for learning about ourselves and our environment. Peekaboo and hide and seek games let children find out about other people in ways that are fun and safe.

### ***If I let my child choose what to do, he will do the same thing for hours. Isn't it better for me to direct him to something new to add to his development?***

Children's play often takes the same form over and over and over again, sometimes with a slight variation, sometimes exactly the same. In this way, they learn about the world and about themselves. These endless repetitions also help parents and children to get to know each other. Adults responding to their signals affectionately and consistently helps children to feel safe and secure. It's good for your child to see that you are interested in what he is interested in. Over time as well, you may begin to see a few small changes that will add to your understanding of your child's interests.

### ***My child doesn't really play, he just throws toys. Don't I have to teach him to behave differently?***

The aim of Watch Me Play! is to help your child to be able to play. Some children start playing with toys in a different way when they have got used to having the full attention of their caregiver for a regular time. Try offering your child a shorter time for

Watch Me Play! to start with, and see if you notice any changes. Replace any toys that could hurt someone with softer toys. Make sure to give your child plenty of preparation for the end of the Watch Me Play! time – try to work out a routine together that works for you and your child. Talk with someone else who knows your child about what stays the same in your child’s play and about any small changes that you see.

***My child’s play can be very boisterous, a bit aggressive sometimes. She sometimes throws her dolls on the floor and stamps on them. Should I stop her?***

As long as no one is getting hurt, the best is to try to accept what your child does when she is playing and just describe what happens in her play. She may repeat this play many times, and you may have to wait quite a long time before something different starts to happen in her play. It can be hard to watch play that is very repetitive or feels aggressive. This is a situation when it would be especially helpful to talk about your child’s play, and how it feels for you when you watch her play, with another adult who knows your child, a family member or a professional who is involved.

A foster carer comments:

***‘Not intervening can lead to a story being told by a child through play.’***

## Watching your child play



Babies and young children need attention to help them grow and thrive just as plants need the sun.

When your child receives your full attention, even for a short time, it helps them to feel settled and to focus, even when you are not around. This can help them to increase their own attention span.

Even if the Watch Me Play time is short, it really helps to have all screens and phones turned off. Children engage very intensely with the world around them. In a quiet environment your child can focus on the ideas and thoughts that are in their play. A quiet environment also helps you to notice and remember what is going on in your child's play.

*A foster carer comments:*

*'It's better in a quiet space with the TV off - you appreciate the time more, both of you are more concentrated and more involved.'*

Give some attention to yourself as well: notice how it feels for you when you are with your child playing. This could be particularly helpful if there have been any concerns about your child's development. Your feelings will help you to know your child's strengths and to understand more about any worries they may be having.

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

### *My child is very clingy - she wants my attention all the time! Won't doing Watch Me Play just make this worse?*

Your child might be more clingy for a while, but many children become more able to play by themselves after they have had a regular Watch Me Play routine for a few weeks. Giving clear instructions about when you are going to do Watch Me Play! and how long for, giving plenty of time to prepare for the end of the time, and reminding her about the next time can also help. If this doesn't change, you might find it helpful to discuss with your health visitor or your child's nursery keyworker.

### *My child plays happily on his own. Does it matter if I respond to a message or email on my phone?*

Having their caregiver's full attention for a regular time can be very reassuring for children who have had worries, who are naturally more anxious or who find it difficult to share and take turns. You are also modelling something important for your child when you show him that you can wait!

### *My child and I enjoy watching CBeebies together. Can we do Watch Me Play with the TV on?*

Watching favourite TV programmes together can be a lovely time for your child and you, but background television creates lots of distractions for children. It's important for all children to have plenty of time with the television off - and especially important for children who may have some developmental or language delay, and for children who have been looked after by different caregivers.

## Talking with your child about their play

When you talk with your child about his or her play, you are helping him or her to make sense of the world. You are showing that his or her ideas are important and interesting and you are also giving your child extra help in developing their own language skills. You can give your child encouragement and praise your child for keeping on trying or trying something new. Leave some silences to give your child time to think!

### *Some helpful ways of talking with your child about their play*

- ✓ *Showing interest: 'Oh! You have chosen the yellow one now!'*
- ✓ *Commenting: 'All the little animals are lying down and now the tiger is coming closer...'*
- ✓ *Describing: 'Now you're having a look around and thinking what to do next...'*
- ✓ *Wondering: 'This dolly might be hoping to have a cup of tea, like the other dollies...'*
- ✓ *Praising: 'Good trying ! It was hard to build it but you kept on trying'*

### *Frequently Asked Question*

***I feel a bit silly when I talk to my child about what she is doing in her play. It doesn't feel natural. How about if I watch but keep quiet?***

This part of Watch Me Play! can feel a bit strange to start off with. But it's very helpful for children's confidence and language development to hear their play being put into words. Many parents and foster carers find they get used to it in a week or two- and are encouraged by

hearing their child using more sounds and words in response. You might find it helpful to imagine yourself talking with a baby or a younger child.

Don't feel you have to talk non-stop ! Leave spaces when you and your child can just get used to being together in a quiet way while he or she is playing.

## **Talking with another adult about the child's play**

There are two kinds of talking In Watch Me Play!: talking with your child about their play, and talking with another interested adult – a family member, a friend, or a professional- about what you see when you watch your child play, and what it feels like when you are with your child playing.

Talking with another interested adult is especially important if watching your child play feels hard to do. Sometimes children's play is enjoyable and interesting to watch – but it can also be repetitive or it may be hard to stay with. For some children, being able to play freely may give an outlet for long held in feelings. Some feelings seem much bigger when they have been held in for a long time.

If there is something that feels aggressive or confusing in your child's play, try to focus on noticing what happens in the play and see whether it changes or stays the same over time. It may be helpful for your child and for you if you can accept the child's play and think about it later with a family member, a health visitor or a professional who is involved with your child.

If your child's play feels upsetting or worrying to watch, and does not change after a few weeks of doing Watch Me Play!, consider seeking advice from a GP, health visitor or a professional who is involved with your child. Talking with another interested adult about what may be on your child's mind can help you to remain calm and thoughtful about your child. This will help your child to feel contained and to trust that the big feelings they are expressing in their play are safe for you to know about. Your observations of your child's play will also help professionals to give you advice about the next steps and any extra support that your child could benefit from.

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

### *Who could I speak to if I have any concerns about my child's play?*

If you are worried about your child's play or about their development, talk to a family member, a health visitor or a professional who knows your child, such as the GP, a looked-after child nurse, a social worker, nursery key worker or a speech therapist. Describing what you have seen in your child's play over a period of time could be very helpful for thinking about what kind of extra support or assessment your child may need. It could also help you to notice your child's strengths and positive changes over time, as well as helping your child to feel more contained.

### *What result will I see if I do Watch me Play regularly- and how long will it take to see some changes?*

Many parents and carers tell us that they notice some changes after two to three weeks of doing Watch Me Play!

Watch Me Play! is a two way process! There may be improvements in your child's speech, behaviour or concentration – and you may find you enjoy being with your child in a different way. Your child may be calmer, and over time he or she may become more able to share and to play on their own. You may feel more confident about picking up on your child's signals. You may feel you both get used to sharing a quiet time during the day.

For some children it may take longer for any changes to be seen, or you may see no change. This could make it especially helpful to talk with a family member or a professional about your observations of your child's play.

## **A Watch Me Play Toy Kit**

Simple toys that allow children to express themselves, communicate and explore their imagination allow more creative play and scope for development and communication than battery operated or electronic devices.

Some children who throw their toys a lot or break them are more able to play when they are in a quiet place with toys that are right for their developmental stage. Children who have had big changes or worries in their lives can be helped by being provided with simple toys. Battery-operated toys limit the scope for imagination and can be over-stimulating for some children.

### ***Toys for Watch Me Play!***

Boxes, containers, wooden spoons

Baby dolls, teddy bears, soft toys

Dolls house and furniture, small wooden dolls

Toy animals

Toy trains, small plastic vehicles

A blanket and a cushion

Plasticine or playdoh

Toy telephone and tea set

Plain and coloured paper

### ***Good toy suppliers online:***

The Social Baby: [www.socialbaby.com](http://www.socialbaby.com)

Plan Toys: [www.plantoys.com](http://www.plantoys.com) (also available from Babipur, Amazon and Ebay).



# A WATCH ME PLAY! Diary

Date: .....

*This week my child has chosen to play with:*

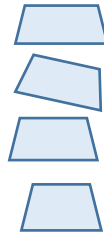
*This is one thing that he or she often does:*

*This is one thing that he or she has started to do:*

*He or she seems to be interested in:*

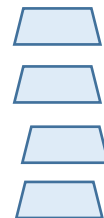
*When we do Watch Me Play! I enjoy:*

- Taking a step back and letting him or her take the lead
- Seeing what my child chooses to do
- Giving him or her my full attention for 15 or 20 minutes
- Something else: .....
- 



*Doing Watch Me Play!, what I find difficult is:*

- Taking a step back and letting him or her take the lead
- Seeing what my child chooses to do
- Giving him or her my full attention for 15 or 20 minutes
- Something else: .....



# Why Play Matters

Wanting to play is natural – for everyone: babies, growing children, and adults.

Having fun together is important. But play isn't just about fun. When a baby watches an adult's face or listens to their voice, he or she is starting to learn.

When we play we learn to:

Explore

Focus

Concentrate

Pay attention

Imitate someone

Try out something new

Do the same thing hundreds of times

Find out about our own feelings

Get to know another person

Learn what we can do

Take turns

Pretend

Wait

Imagine

...

*Being in tune, relaxed and playful together helps babies to grow up healthy and secure. It's good for parents and carers too: playing together means growing together!*

## *Different ages- different kinds of play*

*Copying an adult moving their eyebrows or their tongue is a game even very young babies can enjoy.*

*Tickle games like 'Round and round the garden' can be exciting for growing babies. Notice when your baby looks away or stops laughing - he or she may need a bit of down time before they're ready for the next round of interaction. 'Peekaboo' and 'Hide and Seek' are games that help children manage feelings about people coming and going.*

*Babies love emptying out bags and drawers- turn this into a game of 'Inside and Outside' that you can enjoy together.*

*You can encourage your child to be curious and to learn about the world in a safe way by introducing a few toys at a time and noticing your child's discoveries.*

*Having a place for messy play with playdo, sand, paint or glue helps children to feel confident about trying new things.*

*Bath time is a great time for exploration and early experiments.*

*Playing with rhyming words and singing songs helps children with their language and learning.*

*Playing with dolls and small animals is a way for children to try out their ideas and talk about feelings.*

## *7 Top Tips for Watch Me Play!*

- 1. Watch your child play- you'll get new ideas from him or her*
- 2. Have a regular 'special play time' with your child – let the child take the lead, and wait to be invited to join in*
- 3. Try simple toys that let your child use their imagination*
- 4. Provide a quiet space for play without TV or computers*
- 5. Help your child move to a new activity by singing a song together*
- 6. Keep your child's drawings and paintings in a special place or a folder*
- 7. If playing together feels hard to do, talk to another adult in the family, or to your health visitor*

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