

Gentle Play

QUESTION: I would like my young children to be involved in play that teaches gentleness and caring. Do you have any suggestions?

ANSWER: Children really enjoy having adults involved in make-believe play. If you are willing to take the time to shape the make-believe situations, it is a wonderful time to teach gentleness and caring.

One of my favorite games with young children is lining up chairs and pretending they are seats on an airplane. The child's stuffed animals become the passengers and the child is the flight attendant who passes out pillows and blankets for comfort, reading material and meals. "Are you comfortable?" "Do you need a blanket or a pillow?" "Would you like water or juice?" These are questions that show concern for others.

A variation on hide-seek is to hide stuffed animals around the house. As you and your child find an animal, use words of pleasure and celebration at the discovery. "Oh, I'm so glad to have found you!" "Oh, good - now I can play with you!" These are phrases that teach a child how to verbally express positive feelings toward others.

Care-givers provide help and comfort. Using a washable doll, place a little red paint on the doll's knee or arm. Coach your child to use caring words for the doll. Show him/her how to clean the wound and place a Bandaid on the area.

Barbara Oehlberg, in "Making It Better: Activities for Children Living In A Stressful World," suggests a rescue game for children. Tell your children a story about a little kitten that gets lost, perhaps under a thick cluster of bushes. Children walking home from school hear the kitten's scared and lonely meows. The children decide to form a rescue team by linking their hands and carefully inching the first child under the bushes to rescue the kitten. The first child passes the kitten down the rescue chain to the next child. From hand to hand, each child comforts the kitten with words and strokes. After the story, drape a sheet or blanket over a low table and place a stuffed animal under the table. Guide your child and his playmates in becoming a rescue team for the toy animal.

When you have an opportunity, share with another adult, in your child's presence, how caring and comforting he or she is learning to be. How we hear ourselves described influences our self-image and our behaviors.

