**Learning & Play: Ten ways to interact with children in play**

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As I prepare to re-enter the classroom next year, I have been reading up on all things PLAY. [We](http://www.kyotointernationalschool.org/early-childhood-program/) will be diving head first into a play based curriculum that is clearly defined and structured. It is exciting/inspiring. One of my questions is; **how do we, as adults and teachers, interact with children while they play?**

Here are ten strategies for interacting with children’s play to guide them to higher levels of thinking and complexity.

**TEN WAYS TO INTERACT WITH CHILDREN IN PLAY**

**Narrate**

Follow them around as they play. Point out basic observations. State the obvious. Acknowledge the choices they are making, bring those choices to the forefront of their mind. Observe. Tell the story as it happens.

“I see you are making a house”  
“You’re pulling the wagon over to the water tap”  
You’re digging a deep hole”

**Encourage**

Mention what they have done, and point out the effort it took to do it. As Dweck would say, don’t praise the child, but the effort.  
“You are following your plan very closely”  
“You made a really long bridge, it must have been difficult to make it balance”  
“You observed very closely and drew lots of details”.

**Feedback**

Focus on specifics, the small details where you see growth. This will bring their attention to these details and cause them to have a quick reflection on your statements. Open a space for a conversation about specific skills.  
“You’re using a lot more colors than yesterday”  
“Your clay model is standing because you made the legs thicker.”

**Model**

Bring yourself into the play by discussing your own difficulties, or your own approach to problem solving. Share strategies that are useful to you. Ask them to try and see if they are effective.  
“When I can’t think of what to draw I take a walk to clear my head”  
“Sometimes when I am angry, I like to sit by myself”

**Show (or Tell)**

Sometimes there is a correct way to do something, and the child simply needs to be shown the method. We often feel children need to figure out everything by themselves, but it is just as effective to show them how, in real time, and have them copy you. Or other times, they might not know the problem and even after questioning they don’t see the solution. Don’t be afraid to tell.  
“Take clay roll it with the palm or your hand”  
“Hold the brush like this”  
“To unscrew the lid, hold it with one hand, and then with other turn it this way”  
“I think the bottom is too thin, that’s why the tower is falling down”

**Question**

Provoke their thinking. Ask them specific questions to get them reflecting on what they are doing at a higher level. Encourage them to take their wondering to new levels. Key concepts are a good lens to use to focus their questions. Listen to their observations and their forming theories, then question.  
“What would happen of we mixed it with water?”  
“What other tools does a carpenter use?”  
“Why does the shadow keep moving across the floor?”  
 **Challenge**

Different from questions, this is a call to do something. It asks them to manipulate the materials they are using in a different way that pushes them further, focusing on specific skills.  
“Can you use all the blocks?”  
“Can you make a list of all the items in your shop?  
“I wonder if you could make this map go all the way to the edge of the page?”

**Join**

Lose yourself in the play. Join the scene. Become a character. Help build something. Be a child.

**Inform**

Fill in gaps in their knowledge. If you see them acting out a role, but missing a key element of that role, fill in the blank for them. Provide vocabulary that enriches the play. Inform them of past experiences and situations they have experienced.  
“That tool you are using is called is a spatula”  
“After the doctor helps the patient, they go to the recovery room”  
“Do you remember when we met the Aikido-sensei? He said they always bow before a match”

**Limit**

Tell them what they can or cannot do. Play is not always about student choice. An element of student choice is involved, but the teacher sets constraints. Constraints lead to creative thinking. These constraints are carefully chosen to allow space for exploration emerge.  
“You can only use three colors”  
“That area is closed today”  
“Let’s pretend we are forest animals”

Learning to play is a recursive process that is always changing. We need to be mindful of our own practice. No top ten list will supply the magic formula (though it may give us a framework to think and reflect).

There are many more verbs to add to this list (and in many ways these verbs cross over with each other). Be mindful of when you are using them, and be mindful of why.