

I see YOU



PLAY

Wake up! Find your favorite toys.



I see you play.



You greet the day.

Tiger-walk around the block.

FOUR TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

Sawubona is the Zulu word for “hello.” It literally means *I see you*. When I first learned this, I instantly thought about the relationship between parents and children—or between any caregiver and the little ones they love.

Everyone needs to be *seen*—especially toddlers, who crave the loving attention of the adults in their lives. When we say “I see you” to toddlers, whether by our words or by our actions, what we are really saying is: “I’m paying attention to you. You are important to me. I like you just the way you are.”

Here are four ways you can communicate “I see you play” to the young children in your life.

1. Provide Open-Ended Play Materials

Toddlers often play longer and more creatively with open-ended play materials. Ever notice how your child can spend more time playing with an empty box than the toy that came inside it? Other open-ended items that encourage play include building blocks; sidewalk chalk; craft materials like glue, chenille stems, and old magazines; dress-up clothes (your old T-shirts or hats work!); dolls and stuffed animals; and recyclables such as paper-towel tubes and clean, empty milk jugs.

2. Encourage Imaginative Play

Imaginative play helps young children develop social, emotional, and executive function skills. And it can look very different as children grow. Toddlers might mimic how adults care for them—kissing a “boo-boo” on their teddy bear or trying to feed you a soup they made out of grass, sticks, crayons, or any other available items. Three-year-olds might act out favorite stories from books or TV shows, modifying as they go. And just watch a couple of four-year-olds play dress-up! They are developing complex storylines, sequencing their ideas, shifting gears to incorporate new information, problem-solving with peers, and practicing perspective-taking by acting out how another person (or unicorn or dinosaur) might respond. Your job? Show your delight in children’s imaginations and let them play on!

3. Play Together

When young children play with their caregivers, it strengthens bonds and relieves tension and anxiety. According to researchers at the American Academy of Pediatrics, this kind of play can help “build the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress.”* Of course, your toddler doesn’t need you to play with them all the time—that’s not good for them or you—but making time for playful interactions supports your child’s growth. Playing together might look like:

- pretending to be the patient while your toddler gives you a check-up
- playing simple movement games like Red Light Green Light, Simon Says, and hide-and-seek
- making faces in the mirror together (sad face, happy face, mad face, silly face)

4. Remember: Playtime Is Learning Time

Play is essential to learning! You can help by providing children with time to play, talking with them about what they are doing, and encouraging them to expand their play in creative ways. For example, when you look at something your child has created or watch a storyline they are acting out, you might say:

- “Tell me more about this.”
- “Show me how it works.”
- “I see you are a chef today. What’s your name, chef? What is happening right now? What is going to happen next?”

As Fred Rogers said, “Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”



*Yogman, Michael, et al. 2018. “The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children.” *Pediatrics* 142 (3): e20182058.