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Watch Me Play!

Manual for Parents

Innovation in mind

The Tavistock and Portman 100 YEARS 1920 to 2020

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the many families and children, social workers, clinicians and managers who have given support and ideas for the Watch Me Play! programme and feedback on the manual.

This version of the manual has been adapted by Jenifer Wakelyn (Watch Me Play! Programme lead) and Andrea Katz (Course lead ITSIEY) from Watch Me Play! Manual, Version 1 (2019).

Watch Me Play! is funded by the Tavistock Clinic Foundation.

Tavistock Clinic Foundation

Front cover illustration by Rashawn Fergus, aged five.

tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/watch-me-play

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To cite this manual: Wakelyn, J. & Katz, A. (2020) Watch Me Play! Manual for Parents, Version 2, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, Gateway number: PUB20_64

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Produced: June 2020, Gateway number: PUB20_64

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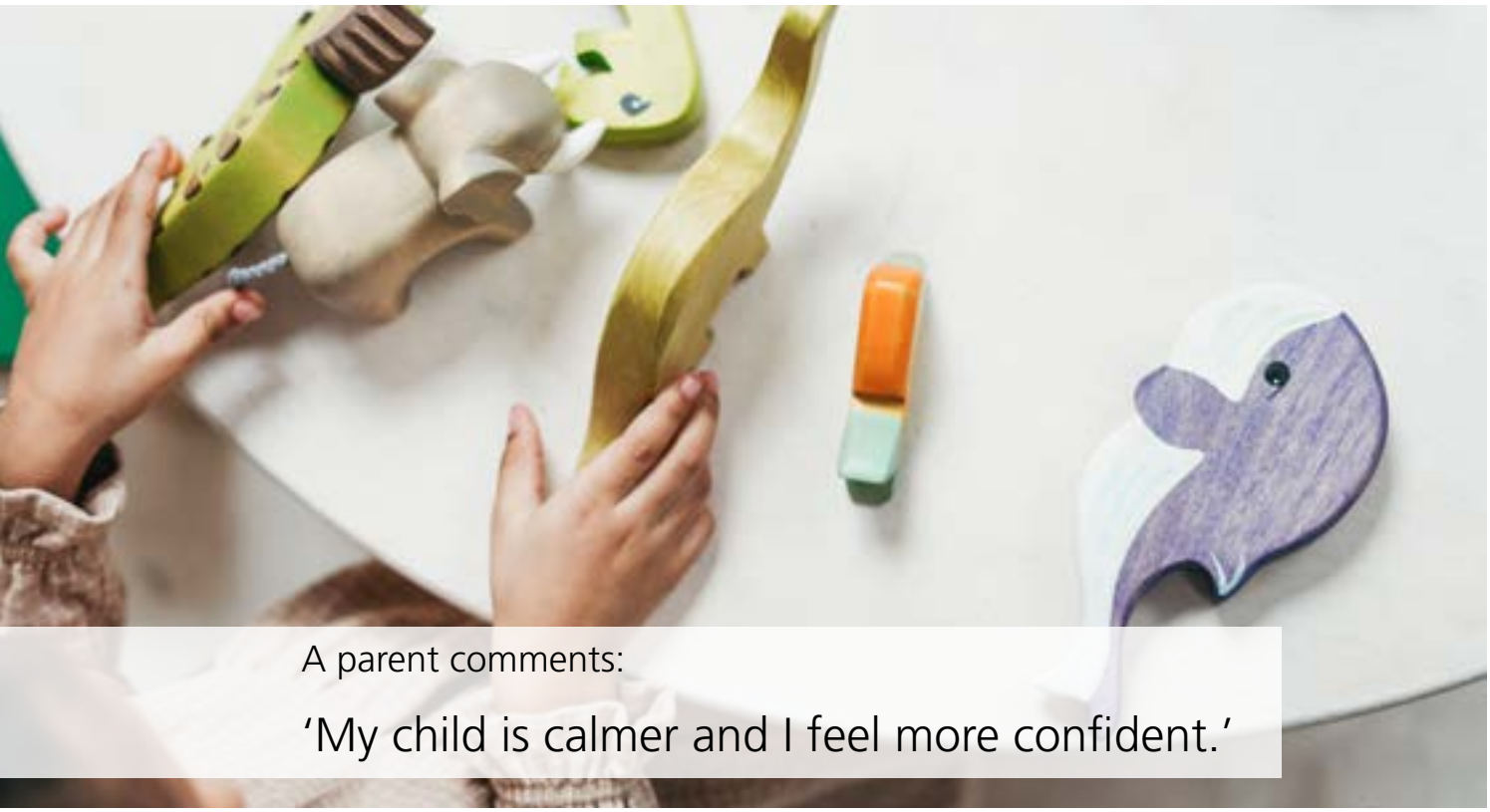
What is Watch Me Play! ?

Watch Me Play! is a simple way for you as a parent or carer to help your baby or young child. Being in tune, relaxed and playful together helps babies and children to grow up healthy and secure. It's good for parents and caregivers too: playing together means growing together!

Watch Me Play! can help your child's confidence and communication. As his or her play skills develop, you can get to know your child better. You can learn more about your child's interests and experiences as well as any worries they may have.

When there have been stresses or worries in the family, some babies and young children may need extra help to express themselves. Your baby or child can benefit from consistent and regular play routines, with your undivided attention. Having confidence that adults accept their feelings, and are interested in them, helps children of all ages to feel settled and secure.

Doing Watch Me Play! every day for 10-20 minutes is helpful for some children; for others, every other day or twice a week works well. Children who find it hard to focus on an activity may be more settled when they are in a quiet space with your full attention. Simple toys allow your child to use their imagination.



A parent comments:

'My child is calmer and I feel more confident.'

How to do Watch Me Play!– Quick View

1 Preparing

Find a time when you can give your baby or child your full attention for up to 20 minutes in a quiet space, with some age-appropriate toys and materials. In some families, the time can be planned ahead; for others, it works better to take a bit of time when possible during the day. Even 5 or 10 minutes is valuable.

2 Baby or child led-play

Your baby or child takes the lead while you allow them to play freely, choosing what they are going to do. With your baby, you can mirror their facial expressions or movements, or you can echo your baby's sounds, or introduce a new variation. Watch your baby to see how he or she responds.

3 Watching your child play

During the Watch Me Play! time, give your baby or child your full attention.

4 Talking to your child about their play

Talk to your child in simple words about what you see them doing. Even a young baby, hearing their parent talking about what they are doing, can feel reassured that you are with them and share their interests.

5 Talking with another adult about the play

Talking with another adult can help you notice more about your child, and enjoy being with your child more. This adult can be a family member, a health visitor, nursery worker, or other involved professional. You can talk about what you have seen your baby or child doing: sometimes the same thing over and over again, sometimes something new. It is also helpful to talk about how it feels to be with your child while they are playing. Talking with another interested adult is especially important if watching your child play feels hard to do.

There's more information on each of these steps in the sections below.

Key Points

- Baby or child-led play promotes development and learning
- Showing that you are interested helps your baby or child to focus
- Watching closely helps you to hold in mind what your child says and does
- Adults thinking together about a child's play helps him or her to feel understood

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I do Watch Me Play! with my grandchild, at nursery, or as a nanny?

Yes! Every adult who is with your child regularly can do Watch Me Play! and help your child to develop.

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, six or seven years, depending on the kind of play they enjoy and are ready for.

Copying an adult, for example by moving their eyebrows or their tongue, is a game even very young babies can enjoy. When your baby looks away or their face becomes still, he or she may need a bit of 'down time' until they are ready for the next round of interaction.

Rhyming words and songs help with the first stages of language learning.
Playing with dolls and small animals allows young children to express feelings and try out ideas. Role-play games develop imagination, language, and social skills such as turn-taking.

Children of all ages can look at books with you, while you follow your child's pace and interest. Your older child may choose to draw, paint or make things during their Watch Me Play! time.

Can I do Watch Me Play! with my two children together?

Many children struggle to share attention! One-to-one attention helps 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 five or ten 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. Siblings will be more able to tolerate this 'special time' when they know that they will get their turn.

1. Preparing

Work out a regular time when you can aim to give your child your full attention for up to 20 minutes. Find a place in your home where you can turn off televisions, computers and phones.

Put away battery-operated and electronic toys during the Watch Me Play! time. Have ready a small selection of simple, age-appropriate toys and books and drawing materials.

Sit on or near the floor. This reassures your child that you aren't going away.

Aim for a gradual ending to the Watch Me Play! time. Show your baby or child how you keep their toys ready for the next Watch Me Play! time in a special basket or box. Help your older child to finish by telling them when you will be doing Watch Me Play! again.

- Sing a song together to help your baby or child move on to a new activity.
- Talk about what you are going to do next as you put the toys away.
- Put any 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 throughout the day are helpful– but doing Watch Me Play! is something extra and different that you do for a short time - up to 20 minutes. While watching your child play, you are also:

- ✓ **talking** with your child about what he or she is choosing to do
- ✓ **avoiding telling** your child how to play or what to do
- ✓ **waiting** to be invited to join in with your child's play
- ✓ **noticing** what it's like for you to be with your child while they are playing

2. Baby and Child-led play

One of the aims of Watch Me Play! is for your baby or child to play freely, making their own choices, while you talk with him or her about what you see. Leave the decisions and choices to your child during Watch Me Play!

Try not to join in unless your baby or child invites you to! If your child does ask you, or show you that they want you to join in, try to follow their lead rather than coming in with your own ideas.

With a baby, it's all about **noticing** and **following** your baby's signals. Spend some time waiting to see where your baby's eyes go. This can give you an idea about what your baby is interested in playing with next. He or she may look at you to invite you to join in.

You can imitate your baby's expressions or sounds and add some yourself, as if having a conversation. Watch your baby closely to see how he or she responds. A baby may look away or start to cry if they need a break from play, or are tired or hungry.

A parent comments:

'I'm learning to understand when my baby is ready to play and when he needs a break or a cuddle.'

Help your child or baby to focus by putting out a small number of toys and books, chosen for their age and interests. For older children you may want to provide drawing materials or playdough.

Let your child or baby take the lead and choose what to play with. Allow your child to explore any or all of the toys you have prepared, using the toys in any way they like, as long as it is safe and no-one gets hurt. If toys are being thrown around, calmly remove them and replace them with soft toys.

- ✓ Give your full attention to whatever your baby or child chooses to do. Even hiding toys or putting them into particular places can be a form of play!
- ✓ Show your interest by smiling and talking with your baby or child about what he or she is doing.
- ✓ Leave tidying up until the end of the Watch Me Play! time.

What not to do during Watch Me Play!

- ✗ Try not to rush your baby: give him or her plenty of time to look at you or to look around. Let your baby take a break from time to time.
- ✗ Try not to teach your child (This one is red, this one is blue)
- ✗ Try not to correct your child (This is the right way)
- ✗ Try not to direct your child (Do it like this)
- ✗ Try not to tidy up during the Watch Me Play! time

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is child-led play important for development?

Baby and child-led play helps parents to tune into their child at each stage of their development. By helping your child to play freely, you are giving space for your child's imagination and skills for learning.

From birth, your baby can start to have playful 'conversations' with you that help you to get to know each other and share enjoyment. When you respond to your baby's expressions or echo her sounds, she knows that you are watching and interested.

For infants, fun games such as Round and Round the Garden, Pat-a-cake or One Potato-Two Potato help children to learn about turn-taking. Peekaboo and hide-and-seek games let children enjoy being discovered.

Children need to develop many skills to be ready for school. Turn-taking, predicting what's coming next, doing something together are all important for future learning and relationships. Exploratory play, making a mess and trying out different ways of using toys and materials help your child to develop confidence in their abilities and co-ordination.

Games in which your child plays out a story promote creativity, language and problem-solving. Even very young children express feelings through this kind of play. For example, a child who has recently lost a pet might repeatedly make toys disappear in the play. If there has been illness in the family, a child might play out a game where doctors make a teddy better.

Sometimes children need to repeat their stories over and over again. Giving your full attention will help your child. You don't need to talk about real life events: simply describing what's happening in the play can help your child to feel understood. e.g. "Teddy is playing now. He's not ill anymore."

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

A caregiver comments:

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

with a slight variation, sometimes exactly the same. Repetition can be an important part of a young child’s learning about what they can do, and about how things work.

During Watch Me Play! it’s good for your child to see that you are interested in and can stay with whatever he or she is interested in, rather than directing them to something new. Consistent and affectionate responses from adults help children to feel safe and secure. Over time, you may begin to see small changes that will add to your understanding of your child and his or her interests.

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

One of the aims of Watch Me Play! is to help your child to be able to play. Your child may need some time to settle into the routine of Watch Me Play! Some children show positive changes in their play and behaviour once 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 small changes over time. Take away any toys that could hurt someone and replace with soft toys. Make sure to give your child time to prepare for the end of the Watch Me Play! time.

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

Even babies can feel cross and throw their toys! As long as no one is getting hurt, the best approach is to try to accept what your child does when she is playing and show an interest and describe what happens in her play. She may repeat this play many times and you may have to wait some time before something different starts to happen in her play.

It can be hard to watch play that is very repetitive or that feels aggressive. If you have any worries, or your child’s play is hard to watch and does not change, it can be helpful to talk about your child’s play with another adult who knows your child - a family member or a professional.

3. Watching your child play

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

Receiving your full attention, even for a short time, helps your child to feel settled and to be more able to occupy themselves when you are not around. This can help your child to increase his or her own attention span.

Even if the Watch Me Play! time is short, it makes a big difference to have all screens and phones turned off. A break from screens and television can help babies and children to focus on their play and interact with you. In a quiet environment your child can express their own ideas through their play.

A quiet environment also helps you to notice and remember what is going on in your child's play. Noticing your own feelings when your child is playing (calm, happy, angry, anxious, curious…) can help you understand something about what your child may be expressing through their play.

A caregiver 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.’

Frequently Asked Questions

My baby won’t let me put her down - she wants my attention all the time! My toddler is very clingy - 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 once there is a regular Watch Me Play! routine. Focused attention from an adult supports children to play for longer and to find new ways of playing. Explaining clearly how long you are going to do Watch Me Play! for, helping your child to prepare for the end, and telling her when you will do Watch Me Play! again can also help.

If your child continues to be clingy, or doesn’t seem able to play, you might find it helpful to discuss with your health visitor, GP 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 during Watch Me Play?

It can make a big difference for your child to have your undivided attention, even for a short time. Watch Me Play! is for up to 20 minutes. Having your full attention for that time can be very reassuring for your child and can help him or her to focus. You are also modelling something important for your child when you show 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’s development to have plenty of time at home with the television off.

4. Talking with your baby or 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 your child's ideas are important and interesting. You are also giving your child extra help to develop their own language skills. Leave some silences to give your child time to think!

Helpful ways of being with your baby while they play

- ✓ **Facial expressions:** responding to your baby's smiles by smiling back or showing pleasure or surprise.
- ✓ **Having conversations:** responding to your baby's sounds with similar sounds, or by talking: 'You're telling me so much!"
- ✓ **Showing interest:** Looking at what your baby looks at and talking about it: 'You can see the bright colours!'
- ✓ **Describing or commenting on what your baby does:** 'You've rolled over!' 'You're holding the ring'.
- ✓ **Talking about what your baby might be feeling:** 'You're enjoying this!' 'You're looking a bit tired now.'
- ✓ **Wondering aloud:** 'Are you reaching for my finger?' 'Do you want to look outside?'

Helpful ways of talking with your child about their play

- ✓ **Showing interest:** 'Oh! You have chosen the yellow one now!'
- ✓ **Commenting:** 'The little animals are lying down now'
- ✓ **Describing:** 'Now you're having a look around and thinking what to do next…'
- ✓ **Talking about what your child might be feeling:** 'You're enjoying this!'
- ✓ **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 to hear you talking about what they are doing. Many caregivers find they soon get used to it and that their baby or child responds by using more sounds or words.

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.

5. 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
- ✓ Talking with another interested adult – a family member 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 and it may be hard to watch. Talking about your baby or child with another adult could help you notice and enjoy more about your child's play.

For some children, being able to play freely may give an outlet for their feelings. If there is something that feels aggressive, or confusing, in your child's play, try to notice what happens in the play. It may change over time. If you are worried, it may be helpful to think about the child's play with a family member, a health visitor or a professional who is involved with your child.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who can 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 nurse, a social worker, nursery key worker or a speech therapist. 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 settled and to trust that they can show you what they might be feeling. What you have noticed about your child's play may also help to indicate what kind of extra support your child could benefit from.

What results will I see if I do Watch Me Play! regularly - and how long will it take to see some changes?

With a baby, a special time to focus on playing and enjoying being together can help you to feel more connected. Watch Me Play! can help parents and babies to get to know each other and this can help with bonding. Some parents see changes straight away; others tell us that they notice changes after two to three weeks of doing Watch Me Play! regularly with their child.

Watch Me Play! is a two-way process: there may be improvements in your older child's concentration, behaviour or speech; 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 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 child's play.

Toys and materials for play

A baby's first experiences of wonder and delight are often about seeing their parent's face, reaching out to touch them, and exchanging looks and sounds. Toys come a bit later. Your baby may enjoy looking at picture books; discovering toys that rustle, rattle or squeak; playing with balls that roll, cups that stack, or different-shaped toys that can be posted.

Children benefit from some time during the day with non-electronic activities. Simple toys that let children express themselves, make choices and use their imagination allow more creative play than battery-operated or electronic devices. Toys with electronic sounds, recorded voices or flashing lights can be over-stimulating for some babies and children.

Suggested toys and materials

- Boxes, containers, wooden spoons
- Baby dolls, teddy bears, soft toys
- Dolls house and furniture, small wooden dolls
- Toy farm and wild animals
- Toy trains, small plastic vehicles
- A blanket and a cushion
- A soft ball
- Plasticine or playdough
- Toy phone and tea set
- Plain paper, crayons or felt tips,
- Finger paints or paint and brushes

A Watch Me Play! Diary

Date: .....

This week I've noticed my baby or child taking an interest in:

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 really like:

When we do Watch Me Play! I enjoy:

- Taking a step back and letting him or her take the lead ☐
- Seeing what my baby or child chooses to do ☐
- Giving him or her my full attention for 10-20 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 baby or child chooses to do ☐
- Giving him or her my full attention for 10-20 minutes ☐
- Something else: ..... ☐

Why Play Matters

Everyone can enjoy play: 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 and children to grow up healthy and secure. It's good for parents and caregivers too: playing together means growing together!

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

Your notes

To read more about the background to Watch Me Play!, child development research and case examples, see Watch Me Play manual part 2: Further information.
https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/watch-me-play

Watch Me Play!
Manual for Parents

Watch Me Play! is a simple way for parents or carers to help their baby or young child. Being in tune, relaxed and playful together helps babies and children to grow up healthy and secure. It's good for parents and caregivers too: playing together means growing together!

What parents and carers say:

'My child is calmer and I feel more confident.'

'There's not a lot of instructions but there's a lot to gain.'

'Gives an awareness of the child's perspective.'

'I can go home and do it today.'

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Produced: May 2020, Gateway number: PUB20_64