

How to *Really* Play With Your Kids

(And Actually Enjoy it as Much as Them)

Playing with your kids. It's supposed to be fun—an enriching and bonding experience. Yet, for many of us—the overworked, the stressed, the ones who've traded sleep for a few more hours of productivity—the idea of one more demand on our time and energy can feel... daunting. Let's be honest, sometimes Netflix and chill sound a hell of a lot better than another round of hide-and-seek.

But here's the reality: engaging with your kids, truly engaging, is not just good for them. It's an investment in your relationship, your sanity, and quite possibly, your future. Studies show it makes them happier, and it makes us happier. Those moments of genuine connection? They're the dividends of the time and energy investment parents make in play. Forget the Pinterest-perfect crafts and the expensive toys. The best games are organic, spontaneous, a little ridiculous, and tailored to your kids' unique quirks and interests. And remember, their primary interest is time with you.

A Note on Play With Older Kids

Remember that play can evolve. Think about activities that spark their interests—video games can turn into a bonding experience when you join them in co-op mode, or a friendly competition in a family trivia night can unleash a whole new level of engagement. Encourage your teens to show you their world. Challenge them to teach you their favourite game. Join them in their latest obsession, whether that's cooking a new recipe together or diving into their favourite shows for a critique. You'll not only bridge the gap between generations but also remind them that you're still in their corner, willing to connect.

Remember, it's about creating shared experiences—messy, spontaneous, and sometimes ridiculous—that deepen your bond and show them that playing together doesn't stop just because they've outgrown the toys.

Simple, Fun Games You'll Actually Enjoy

Ditch the guilt, put down the phone, and get into it. It might be messy, it might be loud, and it is all-but-certain to be tiring, but I promise you, it'll be worth it. And who knows, you might even have some fun along the way.

Here's a bunch of ideas that have worked in our family home over the years that I reckon your kids will love.

Hide and Seek: It's an endless delight how much mileage this old-school game still gets in our home. Kids hiding in kitchen or bathroom cabinets; me hiding in places my body doesn't really want to clamber into anymore; and hours of fun. We tend to play at night time with no lighting other than what comes into the windows from the street. The game has a slightly scary tinge to it that the kids thrive on.

Push Dad Off the Bed: This is perfect for the tired parent. Lie on the bed. Put all your weight into staying put. Then challenge the kids to push you off. For the first minute or two, you'll be too tired to move. And then, their laughter becomes infectious. Their efforts (needling you in the ribs) force you to move. And energy creates energy. The kids win—and the game is over—when they push you off the bed. (If your kids are really small, you can make it easy for them... or have them call in reinforcements in the form of another parent—if available—to help them out.)

Build a Fort: Blankets, pillows, the dining table or lounge—use anything you can. Make it extra fun by having dinner in the fort. Perhaps you can make it big enough for a sleep-out?

Run Away People: We created this as Part II of “Push Dad off the Bed”. Once the parent is on the floor, recovering from the beating they've just taken, all the kids jump onto the bed. The parent's job is simple: get all of the kids off the bed so that none of them are touching the bed in any way. Then the parent is allowed to get back on the bed and “be tired” all over again. With six kids who, from eldest to youngest, are fifteen years apart, this was a big challenge in our home. It required strategy, stacks of energy, and a soft touch. More fun than you can imagine.

Pull Dad's Socks Off: When “Push Dad off the Bed” wasn't working because the kids were too weak and big sisters were away, the kids discovered that pulling my socks off annoyed me. I'd try to keep my socks on. Then I'd be off-balance. And the kids could push me off the bed! Soon enough, “Pull Dad's Socks Off” became a stinky, kind of gross, stand-alone game.

Security: This one is really for kids under about seven years of age. A parent is on “patrol”. They must only walk in one direction (e.g., down the hall) until they hit the wall. Then they can turn and go in another direction. The goal is for the kids to be outside the house and try to “break in” and get to a designated point (like the fridge where the treats are) without security turning around and catching them. If they are behind “security”, the parent can't turn around and catch them unless they come to a wall, which requires a shift in direction.

Tickle-Monster Chase: This one's simple. You (the parent) are the tickle-monster. You make lots of “roar” sounds and chase your kids around the house. When you catch them, you tickle them. When they say **stop**, you let them go and chase them again.

Making Memories Through Play

Screens are addictive, attention spans are shrinking, and our kids are growing up in a world that's more chaotic than ever. But know this: roughhousing on the bed, building a pillow fort, or chasing your kids around the house like a maniac? That's the antidote. It's not just about being a 'good parent'. It's about joy. It's about resilience. It's about time. That's how kids spell L-O-V-E; they spell it T-I-M-E.

So despite all that we have to deal with each day, let it go and be in the moment. Go make some memories. Your kids will thank you, and frankly, so will your future self.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.