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BIRTH TO THREE: Play is important work for young preschoolers

(<http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/news/sevendays/24904006-35/child-birth-needs-parent-provide.csp>)

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For The Register-Guard

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I recently worked with Amanda, a mother who was experiencing high levels of stress because of her child's challenging behavior.

In addition to feeling frustrated at home and embarrassed in public, she was disparaging about herself, discouraged by her skills as a parent and uncomfortable with her negative feelings about her child.

Together, we worked on many ideas and strategies to improve her situation, but the foundation upon which we built everything else was play.

For young children, play is the means through which they access the world around them. Play is how they learn how things work, how to get their needs met, how to interact with others, and all of the concepts and skills they need to learn.

For you as a parent, play is your passport — the entrance to building a supportive, nurturing relationship with your child.

You provide your child with food, clothing and shelter to meet your child's basic care needs. But what do you provide to meet your child's developmental needs?

Infants, toddlers and preschool-age children learn through activity and interaction, and by participating in their important work, their education, their play.

Through play, you can provide your child with the support needed to learn and grow, to learn how to learn and to get needs met in safe, appropriate ways.

So here's a challenge: As part of your daily routine, set aside 10 to 20 minutes to have uninterrupted, child-directed playtime with your child. This is an opportunity to meet your child's developmental needs and provide your child with unconditional, positive attention.

What's the best time to do this? Right after you get home from work or school or from picking up your child from preschool.

It may seem counterintuitive: You're exhausted from work and would like a break, and then you can give your child some attention. But this is both a major transition time and a reunion for you and your child — a chance, after separation, to reconnect in a way that fosters cooperation and a healthy relationship.

Amanda has made great progress in supporting her child's social and emotional development, in the way she feels about her child and in how she feels about herself as a parent. Their world isn't perfect — there are still occasional challenges and frustrations. She notices that when she doesn't set aside time for their play routine, they experience behavior regression.

But things are better. She wrote to me recently and shared that, "The other day I was thinking that I was a great mom." And play is the thing that began the positive change for her and her child.

Gerry Morgan is a behavior specialist with Early Childhood CARES, an agency that provides early intervention and early childhood special education services to Lane County children ages birth to 5. If you have concerns about your child's development, call 541-346-2578 or 800-925-8694 to schedule a free screening in English or Spanish. The opinions expressed in this column are those of the writer. Birth To Three is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening families through parent support and education. For more information about Birth To Three, visit www.birthto3.org or call 541-484-5316.