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DR. BECKY'S GUIDE TO Open-Ended Play

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Let's talk about open-ended play.

This kind of play has no clear instructions or goals, no winners or losers - instead, it's all about imagination, curiosity, and presence. Think: dressing up, playing pretend, making art, or shaping ideas with something as simple and classic as Play-Doh compound. For some parents, open-ended play is a highlight of raising kids. And for others? It can feel boring, intimidating, or just... awkward.

As a clinical psychologist, mom of three, and founder of [Good Inside](#), I know open-ended play is one of the most powerful tools we have to connect with our kids and support their development. And this is also true: Your relationship to play isn't a barometer for your relationship with your kid. In fact, once you let go of the pressure to get it "right", play becomes more possible (and more impactful!) than you might think.

So, let's get started: In this guide, I'll show you how to make open-ended play with your kid feel simple, meaningful, and even - dare I say it? - fun.

Dr. Becky



WHY PLAY MATTERS

A core belief at Good Inside is that we have to understand before we intervene. So, what's really happening when we play with our kids - especially open-ended play? The truth is being silly is serious business. Play helps kids:

- **Make sense of the world around them** by experimenting with ideas, trying on new roles, and exploring their feelings.
- **Build life-long skills** like frustration tolerance, confidence, and problem-solving.
- **Feel connected to us** - seen, valued, and loved - just for being themselves.



Whether they're squishing a ball of Play-Doh compound into a pizza or pretending to be a dog, open-ended play helps kids process feelings, take creative risks, and learn that their ideas matter.

5 STEPS TO OPEN-ENDED PLAY

Here are five practical strategies you can use to discover what feels “right” for you and your kid:

1. Explore your experience with play.

How did you play as a kid? Did your caregivers ever join in? Was play valued - or seen as a waste of time? These questions can help you reflect on what you learned about play as a kid - and how that shapes your comfort level with play as a parent.

Something else: No matter what play looked like for you when you were younger, modern adult life adds its own story. We're taught to prioritize productivity and planning as we get older - so it makes sense if it feels tricky to slow down and be present with your kid. The good news? We all still have a 'playful' part inside of us - it just takes time to get to know.

PUT THIS IDEA INTO ACTION

Tell yourself, “I’m capable of play. This feels hard because it’s new - and I can do new, hard things.” If it helps, pick up something tactile – like a Play-Doh ball – and practice squishing, rolling, and making shapes without any goal.

2. Expand your definition.

Play is any moment where you're **1) present**, **2) engaged**, and **3) free to explore**. This means it doesn't need to be long or elaborate. No intricate storylines or picture-perfect playroom required! Play can be as simple as making silly noises in the car, shaping a smiley face with Play-Doh colors, or dancing with your kid in the kitchen while your coffee brews.

PUT THIS IDEA INTO ACTION

Use a silly voice tonight to announce: "It's dinner tiiiiime!" Tell yourself, "This counts as play."

3. Schedule play.

You don't need endless free time to play with your kid. Even just a few focused minutes can fill your child's emotional cup - reducing power struggles and increasing cooperation throughout the day.

PUT THIS IDEA INTO ACTION

Pick a set time to play with your kid this week. If you think you can do 30 minutes, try 15. If you think you can do 10? Start with five. Set out a few open-ended materials – like Play-Doh colors and tools – and let the moment unfold.

4. Put your phone away.

"Play No Phone" (PNP) is a go-to Good Inside strategy. It seems simple... and it's deceptively hard! Here's the thing: When our phones are nearby, our attention is inherently split. And kids can feel that - even if they don't say it. By putting your phone away, you're telling your kid: "You are worthy of my full attention."

PUT THIS IDEA INTO ACTION

Put your phone on silent and leave it in another room. Close the door. Trust that this matters!

5. Follow your child's lead.

Open-ended play means joining *your child's* world - not directing, correcting, or suggesting what should happen during your time together. Let's be real: Following can feel tricky! If you find yourself thinking, "Am I doing enough?"... the answer is yes.

PUT THIS IDEA INTO ACTION

- **Observe.** Sit silently next to your kid - really, that's all! Presence is an action.
- **Narrate.** Instead of asking questions about what they're doing or why, simply describe it: "You're squishing all the Play-Doh colors together! Ooh, now you're creating one giant ball!"
- **Mirror.** Imitate whatever your kid is choosing to make, create, or play.

BONUS FUN! 3 IMAGINATIVE WAYS TO START CREATING WITH PLAY-DOH® COMPOUND

[Play-Doh compound](#) is a perfect tool for open-ended play - no instructions needed, just endless opportunity for imagination and creativity! Here are a few activities to get you started:

- **Copy Cat.** Whether your kid creates an imaginary species, rolls out tiny circles, or mixes different colors, copy their moves.
- **Pass the Play-Doh Can.** Ask your kid to make the first shape, and then take turns adding one new piece at a time. No rules, no plan - just follow where your imagination takes you! When the timer is up, invite your child to make up a story about what you've created together.
- **Kids Can Be In Charge.** Tell your kid they're "the boss" for today's playtime, and you're their helper. They get to assign you Play-Doh jobs: flatten pieces, hand them a color, or roll something out. Our kids spend so much of their days being told what to do - letting them be in control - even with something small like choosing what to make with their Play-Doh colors - builds their sense of autonomy and independence.

Imagination is a superpower. And encouraging imagination matters. Every squish, roll, and shape of Play-Doh compound gives kids (and adults!) the freedom to imagine boldly, explore creatively, and express themselves through open-ended play!