

Child-Led Time

Child-led time refers to a play session that is directed by the child rather than the adult. It is a period of free-time or play, in which the child may actively guide the adult through play activities, or, if the child does not wish to “direct” the adult, the adult simply plays alongside the child, following their lead.

WHAT DOES CHILD-LED TIME LOOK LIKE?

- ☐ Adults provide high-quality, undivided attention.
- ☐ Students have access to as many of their favorite toys and activities as is feasible.
- ☐ No work or learning demands are placed during this time.
- ☐ The child leads the sequence and structure of the activity.
- ☐ The child may make up their own rules for the game or activity and instruct the adult “how” to play.
- ☐ The adult narrates their own play or solicits feedback from the child (e.g., “I’m going to build a tower here!” or “Can I build a tower here?”) and accepts the child’s direction.
- ☐ Adult refrains from asking “learning” questions or adding anything to the context that may be interpreted as a demand (e.g., “Do you want to help me build this tower?”; “Can you tell me what color this is?”).

WHY DO EDUCATORS IMPLEMENT CHILD-LED TIME?

- ☐ to establish or rebuild trust and build rapport with the student,
- ☐ to identify a context in which no interfering behaviors occur, and in which the student is happy, relaxed, and engaged,
- ☐ to learn more about the student’s values, motivations, and language skills, and to understand what “fun” really looks like to the child, and
- ☐ to balance adult-led activities with activities where the child’s voice and choice are prioritized and elevated.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CHILD-LED TIME?

- ☐ Students learn that they have some “control” within their learning environment.
- ☐ Adults become more preferred and more likely to earn the child’s trust and cooperation.
- ☐ Adults learn about the child’s preferences.
- ☐ When students are given more control in a play context, they may be less likely to inappropriately seek out control in other contexts.
- ☐ Child-led time can be used within the context of other interventions such as Universal Protocols and Skill-Based Treatment (see additional TRIAD resources for more information on these).

HOW IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM ADULT-LED TIME?

- ❑ “During adult-led play, adults oversee playful learning experiences like games, activities, and social events, but kids are in control during child-led play. Child-led play is a child-directed experience unaffected by adult motives, responsibilities, or rules” (Cox 2024).
- ❑ The adult aims to learn about the child through observation and interaction, rather than the child learning from the adult.

EXAMPLES OF CHILD-LED ACTIVITIES

- ❑ Simon Says (child is Simon),
- ❑ playing “school” (child is the teacher),
- ❑ video games (the child leads the mission),
- ❑ action figures/puppets/dolls (the child decides what the story will be about and what roles the adult will play), and
- ❑ cards/board games (the child makes their own rules).

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL CHALLENGES WITHIN CHILD-LED TIME, AND HOW SHOULD THEY BE ADDRESSED?

- ❑ If the child makes an unreasonable request (“Can we play outside?”), don’t say no, but redirect them to another activity (“We can pretend we’re playing outside.”).
- ❑ It is important to establish a clear beginning and end to child-led time. It may help to provide a signal such as wearing a certain hat or displaying a visual for when child-led time is in place.

REFERENCES

- ❑ Cox, Miranda. (2024, November 15). Adult-led Play & Child-led Play– Differences, Benefits, Balance. *Mission Momplex*. (<https://missionmomplex.com/child-led-adult-led-play-differences-balance-benefits/>).