

HARBOR TIME

FILLING YOUR CHILD'S SAILS

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We live in a world marked by busyness and multiple demands. Trying to make room for “one more thing” can seem overwhelming. Yet, slowing down to enter into your child’s world is one of the most beneficial and rewarding things you can do both for your child and for your family. For your child, the opportunity to have your undivided attention functions to recharge the emotional and spiritual centers of his brain. In the context of being a Safe Harbor, it is an intentional exercise in blowing a wind of delight into your child’s sails. More than being a luxury, it is a necessity if your child is to meet the challenges of his day with energy and confidence. For your family, it actually increases the likelihood that your child will be able to function independently, thereby allowing other goals to be accomplished. Unfortunately, many parents fall into the trap of making a special interaction with their child contingent on good behavior and the accomplishment of other goals (homework, chores, etc.) first. This is like telling your car, when the tank is empty, that you’ll stop to get gas in 3 more exits, but only if stops sputtering! If your child has no wind in his sails, you should expect your child to become irritable, misbehave, and “drag his feet”. This can often be averted with regular and predictable Harbor Time interactions. Harbor Time is a specific type of interaction that is more structured than just hanging out together but more relaxed than teaching play (which is most parents’ default form of play, whether they realize it or not). The following are the basic rules which govern Harbor Time:

RULE #1

NO interruptions unless it is an emergency. No phone calls. No multi-tasking. With this in mind, make sure everybody has had a snack and been to the bathroom before getting started.

RULE #2

Follow your child’s lead. Allow your child to answer the question “What should we do?” within the boundaries you have set in terms of time, safety, and available resources. Discover how your child wants to make use of this time (It’s his sails being filled!). Enter into his world. Ask questions (“What should the doll baby say?” “Is it my turn now?” “Where should the truck go?”). Narrate what you see happening (“Boy, that was a big jump;” “You have a lot of energy today;” “Your doll baby looks sad.”). Mirror his emotions as much as possible. This is one of your best opportunities to learn about your child and what makes her tick. Relieve yourself of the pressure of having to act grown-up, have all the right answers, or set your child down the “right” path. You have the rest of your day to do and be those things to your child.

RULE #3

Your child’s rules rule! It doesn’t matter if that’s not what the toy was made for, or how the game is supposed to be played (according to the adult’s rulebook). The obvious exception to this rule is in the case of real danger, such as hitting with a stick or jumping from too high a place.

RULE #4

NO teaching unless your child asks for it. Rules #3 and #4 are merely extensions of Rule #2 (Follow your child's lead!)

RULE #5

Keep praise and limit setting to a minimum. Both cause your child to direct his energy toward pleasing you, which is sail draining as opposed to sail filling.

RULE #6

Have FUN. Laugh. Be silly. Act her age instead of trying to get her to be yours!

RULE #7

Make a date for your next Harbor Time. Setting an expectation for your child that you will be available to her at a specific time in the future gives her something to look forward to and eases the anxiety of not knowing when you will be available again. It is like the difference you feel riding down the highway on empty not knowing when the next gas station is versus how you feel after passing the sign that says "Gas-5 miles".

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

How often you should have a Harbor Time with your child should be driven primarily by your child's age, but will also be affected by his natural temperament. Predictably, your child's ability to hold your delight grows with age. This means more frequent, and shorter, sessions during your child's early years and less frequent, but longer, sessions as your child grows into adolescence. In the first year, having Harbor Time in-between naps is a good rule of thumb. As she moves into toddlerhood, two to three Harbor Times per day should be sufficient. The beginning of school will generally necessitate knocking down these interactions to once a day (immediately after school is recommended). As your child reaches pre-adolescence (roughly 8-12 years), her ability to hold onto your delight for longer periods, as well as her shifting developmental need to experience delight and acceptance from peers, means that your Harbor Time interactions can likely be stretched out to once or twice per week. They can then be thought of as "dates" with your child. The amount of time you should aim to commit to Harbor Time depends both on your child's age, temperament, and interests. Simply put, some children fill up with your delight more efficiently than others. So in the end, the best marker is your child's cues. Most children, once filled, will indicate that they are ready to move on to other activities. Their sudden disinterest in Mom or Dad is a compliment to your parenting, not a rejection of it! With this in mind, these are some recommended starting points.

Infants (0-1) Interactions of several minutes at a time are often sufficient. Keep in mind that infants are over-stimulated fairly easily which can then be as detrimental to them as a lack of interaction.

Toddlers (1-3) Gradually boost your Harbor Time to 15 minute sessions

Pre-schoolers (4-5) 15-20 minutes per session.

Young school age (5-8) 15-30 minutes per session.

Pre-adolescents (8-12) 30 minutes or more per session. Your time together can begin to be framed as a special “date” that you have with your child.

Adolescents (13+) Depending on the activity, but a regular “date” is recommended, such as going out to breakfast together one morning each week.

EMPTY SAILS

Signs that your child has lost your delight and is in need of some immediate Harbor Time:

- Irritability
- Appearing “wound-up” and distractible
- Clinginess
- Negative attention seeking behaviors
- Withdrawal and a lack of interest in things that usually motivate your child
- Dawdling or “foot dragging”

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