

PLAYING-2-GETHER: TEACHER SENSIVITY AS A BASIS FOR INCLUSION IN PRESCHOOL

COACHING MANUAL FOR THE PRESERVICE / INSERVICE EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

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SUMMARY

This coaching manual was created in the context of the project “Playing-2-gether: Teacher sensitivity as a basis for inclusion in preschool”, funded by the Erasmus+ Program (2017-1-SK01-KA201-035321). It was designed by researchers and teacher trainers from higher education institutions from Belgium, Portugal, The Netherlands and Slovakia, motivated towards the improvement of the quality of teacher-child interaction through play, in preschool settings. In the light of an increasingly diverse European society, we acknowledge the importance of teachers knowing how to interact with all children (and with at-risk children, particularly) in a positive way, in order to create an inclusive, safe and stimulating environment for them. We believe that qualitative teacher-child interactions are necessary for all children to feel good in the classroom and have ample chances for their further socio-emotional and academic development.

This manual aims to constitute a support tool for the training of preservice and inservice preschool teachers in learning how to implement the Playing-2-gether framework in their daily practices with children. It is intended to be used in close connection with the Playing-2-gether website (www.p2g.ukf.sk) that constitutes the most visible presentation of the Playing-2-gether framework. The combined use of these two resources is highly encouraged in order to maximise the potential of the training.

The manual is divided into three main sections. The introductory section includes specific information about the manual’s purpose, target audience and how it can be used. The second section focuses on Playing-2-gether in class, bringing evidence about the importance of qualitative teacher-child relationships and describing the Playing-2-gether skills. The third section is dedicated to the training processes that can be developed, with a particular emphasis on the use of the videofeedback as a coaching tool. In the final part of the manual, references and further sources of information are made available.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. PURPOSE OF THE MANUAL

The project Playing-2-gether aims to improve teacher sensitivity for both preservice and inservice teachers, focusing on their interactions during play with preschoolers in the classroom. Playing-2-gether departs from the idea that qualitative teacher-child relationships are a basis for the inclusion of all children, and particularly of children with challenging behaviour or children that go unnoticed in the preschool.

Building on an evidence-based framework, the project focuses on the development and dissemination of a website (www.p2g.ukf.sk) that offers teachers tools to build teacher sensitivity while playing with preschoolers in their classroom, both as a strategy for prevention and intervention. The main purpose of this coaching manual is to support effective use of this website for professionalization and implementation of the Playing-2-gether skills.

This manual tries to support teachers in building knowledge and competences around two core questions:

- How to interact with children in a sensitive way?
- How to learn to interact with children in a sensitive way?

For that, it brings together a set of strategies that support processes of training, reflection and coaching. Furthermore, we expect to enhance the effectiveness of the Playing-2-gether website by developing and disseminating an easily accessible coaching manual for trainers.

1.2. WHO IS THIS MANUAL FOR

This coaching manual is intended for preschool teachers that want to explore possibilities for professional development in matters related to teacher sensitivity as a basis for inclusion in the classroom, which are fundamental basics for providing high quality early childhood education. It focuses on educational settings with preschoolers between 2,5 and 6 years old.

It can be used, alongside the tools presented in the website, in the preservice and inservice preschool teachers training, either with supervision purposes (expert-student feedback) or intervision purposes (peer feedback). It is meant for teachers that are motivated to implement Playing-2-gether in their classrooms either as prevention or as an intervention strategy.

1.3. HOW TO USE THIS MANUAL

As mentioned, we recommend that the manual should be used alongside the other Playing-2-gether resources in the website (www.p2g.ukf.sk), in a synergic way.

This means, for example, that watching the video fragments of the Playing-2-gether skills that are integrated in the website, or the contact with the professional stories that are presented on the site, will allow for a clearer and more organic approach to learning Playing-2-gether. We believe that this approach will not only facilitate practicing the videofeedback, but it will also increase the sustainability of this project.

2. PLAYING-2-GETHER IN CLASS

2.1. THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH QUALITY TEACHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Recent research has shown the importance of teacher sensitivity for young children's current and later academic, behavioral and socio-emotional development (e.g., Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014; Spilled, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). Moreover, teacher sensitivity has been found to have compensatory effects for the development of at-risk children (e.g., Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In Belgium, an online Playing-2-gether course has already shown its positive effects on teacher sensitivity of Belgian preservice teachers (Vancraeyveldt et al., 2015).

In Playing-2-gether the focus lies on strengthening the relationship between teacher and preschooler by playing together with the child. It is built on attachment theory. If you want to know more about attachment theory, go to the section "Why?" on the website where you can find some core questions and answers on this topic by the Flemish expert Hilde Colpin. Playing-2-gether also departs from the idea that building high quality teacher-child relationships is a very important basis for creating an inclusive preschool context for children and adults. In the section "Why?" of our website, you can also find questions and answers by Manuela Sanches-Ferreira, Portuguese expert in inclusive education, that can help you understand the relevance of this topic.

As stated in section "How?" of the website, Playing-2-gether can be implemented both as a preventive strategy or as an intervention. In both cases, two aspects are very important: **teacher sensitivity and following the child's lead:**

- (i) With **teacher sensitivity** we mean that teachers notice signals of preschoolers and respond to them appropriately. Teachers who cultivate sensitivity can create qualitative relationships with children more easily. The development of the teacher's sensitivity is one of the main objectives of Playing-2-gether, because this way you make clear that you accept the preschoolers as they are. Being sensitive means that you try to find out the feelings and needs of the child and subsequently take them into account. You try to put yourself in their

position. Being sensitive is something you can express in different ways. Some examples:

- you show appreciation for the child ("I am really happy that you want to play with me");
- you put the child's feelings and needs into words ("You like to play with a jigsaw puzzle");
- you listen to the child and give free rein when they want to express themselves or to tell you something;
- you take into account the child's situation;

As a teacher, you need to juggle sensitivity for the needs of individual children and sensitivity for the needs of the class group. In Playing-2-gether we focus on teacher sensitivity for the needs of individual children. Skills that may help you to be sensitive are 'observing', 'labeling the child's feelings' and 'taking the child's relational needs into account'. You can find out more on these skills in the next section of the manual and in the section "P2G Skills" of the website.

- (ii) With **following the child's lead**, we mean that the child can decide what game will be played during the Playing-2-gether session. By following the child, you show that you are open to and support the child's choices. Playing-2-gether interaction skills that are particularly helpful for following the child's lead are 'observing', 'mirroring', 'verbally describing' and the '*don't* skills'. You can find out more on these different skills in the next section of the manual and in the section "P2G Skills" of the website.

2.2. THE ORGANIZATION OF PLAYING-2-GETHER IN CLASS

Playing-2-gether in class consists of a series of play sessions in which you play together with one or more children in your group for about 7 to 15 minutes, about two or three times a week. Before starting to use the Playing-2-gether skills, you should have in mind some careful decisions around these play sessions. Firstly, if you want to focus on building a qualitative teacher-child relationship with a child with whom you have difficulties

(intervention), it is important that you schedule Playing-2-gether sessions regularly with this child. It is best to **schedule Playing-2-gether into the weekly or daily school timetable**, preferably **during free play moments**. You can choose to work with this child alone or in small groups of children. In the later situation, you will mainly focus on your bond with this one child.

At the start of the Playing-2-gether session, the child may choose where and what to play. If a child has difficulty in making a choice, you might help the child by presenting a more limited range of play options the child normally likes. You can also choose to organize a **Playing-2-gether box**, in which you put interesting materials to play with. The child may choose the toys he or she prefers to play with.

Once the child has chosen the materials or the corner where he/she wants to play, you just wait for a while and observe how the child starts to play. When you think that you understand what is important to the child in the play, you may start to follow the child's lead and apply other skills of Playing-2-gether. It is very important that you are clear and reliable in when you will be Playing-2-gether with the child. It is also very important that the child knows for how long you will play together, and when you will go away. Use a glass hour or the clock to show the child when the session will be over.

When you want to use Playing-2-gether as a prevention, that is, with children you have a good relationship and with children that are new in your group, you work along the same principles as with intervention, but you don't need to be as explicit about the timing of your play guidance. When children are playing, you first observe and then connect to one or more children by joining the play. You don't need to ask questions when you enter the corner or when you sit next to the children, although you might ask "Can I join you?".

You can find further information about the organization of Playing-2-gether in the class on the website (section "How?") and later in this manual, in the section dedicated to FAQ.

2.3. PLAYING-2-GETHER SKILLS

In this section, a brief description of the Playing-2-gether skills is given next to a set of questions and recommendations that are relevant when using these skills in the classroom. For illustration and clarification purposes, a link to video fragments from the teachers of our project is presented for each one of the skills.

Attention: it is important that the Playing-2-gether skills are implemented in a **natural** way. Do not force yourself. A spontaneous and relaxed qualitative teacher-child relationship is more important than the strict execution of the skills. On section 3 of this manual you can find further information on the implementation of Playing-2-gether skills.

2.3.1. OBSERVING

Observing is closely **watching** the **behavior** of and meticulously **listening** to the child. Before you start with the other Playing-2-gether skills, you have to take the time to watch the child. You can keep the following questions in mind when observing the child:

- how long does it take before the child starts playing?
- which activity does the child choose?
- why do you think that the child has chosen for this activity in particular?
- how does the child act during the first minutes of the activity?
- does the child act differently from when you normally see him in class?
- try to notice something regarding the child that you had not noticed before
- how do you feel? How do you feel towards the child?

There is no need to take notes or run over each and every point. It is more important that you learn to understand the child better. This way, you can follow the child's play better.

2.3.2 MIRRORING

Look closely at the child and imitate the behaviour. This can strengthen the child's play.

Example: if the child starts to dress a doll, you can take another doll to dress.

Make sure that you don't lose yourself in your own game, but that you pay enough attention to the child playing.

Make sure your imitation looks natural. A **spontaneous and relaxed** qualitative teacher-child relationship is more important than strict imitation. *Example:* Suppose the child chooses to draw. You don't need to draw the same thing as the child. The fact that you are drawing together is in itself conducive to the teacher-child relationship.

2.3.3 VERBALLY DESCRIBING

Describe the child's **behavior** out loud: what exactly is the child **doing**?

Example: the child is playing with building blocks and takes all the blue building blocks.

You say: "You take all the blue building blocks."

You can also describe what you notice concerning **the way** the child is doing something.

Example: the child is solving a puzzle. You say: "I see that you are completing the puzzle row by row."

This way, you show you are keeping a close watch on the child's play and you stimulate the child to continue playing.

Think of yourself as a sports commentator on the radio who is reporting on a soccer game in a neutral voice. Do this only when it is functional. Don't overdo it. Keep silences in between to make space for the child to say something.

It is also interesting to describe the behavior when there are emotions of surprise, enthusiasm, frustration, or if you don't understand.

You can also listen to what the child **says** and **repeat this out loud** in approximately the same words (=paraphrasing).

Example: When the child says: "Look, I have drawn my mommy", you can say: "Ah, indeed, you have drawn your mother".

Do not describe everything the child does. It may sound unnatural and could disrupt the child's game.

2.3.4 LABELING FEELINGS

Label the child's emotions and feelings while you are playing together. Pay attention to what the child **says**, but also to their **facial expression** and **posture** (verbal and non-verbal signals). Both positive and negative experiences and feelings are important.

Example: the child enthusiastically says: "I have got a new bike". Then you can say: "I notice that you are happy with your new bike".

Example: the child sadly tells you that his/her dog is ill. You can say: "It seems to upset you." It is also interesting to describe the behavior when there are emotions of surprise, enthusiasm, frustration, or if you don't understand.

Labeling the experiences and the feelings of the child(ren) is something you should do/practice during the whole day in preschool. You can also express your own feelings of enthusiasm, surprise or disappointment if you don't succeed with something in the play."

2.3.5 RELATIONAL NEEDS

During Playing-2-gether you have to take the child's **relational needs** into account as much as possible. With relational needs we refer to the child's specific **needs** in the teacher-child relationship.

Example: A child that regularly wants to cuddle, hold your hand, sit on your lap, ... can have a **need for affection** from you.

Example: A child that constantly says he/she cannot do things, that quickly gives up or gets angry if things don't work out, ... can have a **need for help or encouragement**.

Example: a child that comes to you a lot to tell you what happened at home, in the playground, during the holidays, can feel a **need for someone who listens or for attention**.

The main questions you should ask yourself to determine the child's relational needs are:

- what does this particular child need in the relationship with me as a teacher?
- what can I offer?
- why do I think that the child has this specific need?

To answer these questions, you can rely on your own observations during class, other teachers' observations or background information you have about the child.

Almost all children need a sense of acceptance, safety, firmness, ... However, Playing-2-gether mainly wants you to think carefully about **the child's most prominent relational needs at that moment.**

More examples of relational needs and information about how to take them into account can be found **here.**

Taking the relational needs of the child(ren) into account is something you should do/practice during the whole day in preschool.

2.3.6 COMBINATION OF SKILLS

It is the most natural to **combine the different Playing-2-gether skills** in real life practice. However, some teachers(-in-training) prefer to practice the different skills separately. The combination of both strategies may be important to integrate these complex interaction skills in daily practice.

2.3.7 DON'T SKILLS

Playing-2-gether is meant for the child to experience that whatever he/she undertakes or does is okay. Therefore, there are a number of DON'T skills you **should try to avoid** during Playing-2-gether. For example, try to avoid asking questions, because by asking questions you take charge of the play and thus steer the play

During Playing-2-gether

- Try to avoid **asking the child questions** because this might disturb the child's play. You can ask questions, but preferable open-ended questions and try to ask as few questions as possible.
- Don't give **orders** or **commands**
- Don't **criticize** the child's behavior
- Don't **teach** the child **a skill**
- Don't **punish** the child's behavior

These DON'T skills are "steering", while during Playing-2-gether the objective is to "follow the child's lead".

3. HOW TO LEARN TO INTERACT WITH CHILDREN

The use of the Playing-2-gether skills implies a training process in which experimentation/implementation in the classroom, videofeedback and reflection are paramount. In this section, guidelines are presented in order to clarify some relevant steps that will help you, your colleague, your student or your trainee to learn how to implement this framework in your practice. In the rest of this section, we will speak of ‘the trainee’, when referring to the inservice or preservice teacher(s) that wants to learn.

3.1. GUIDELINES FOR TRAINING

The training on Playing-2-gether should preferably be carried out in small groups or pairs because of the broader possibilities for dialogue and sharing, whether you are in an expert-student training or among peers, whether the trainees are inservice or preservice teachers.

If the trainees want to learn Playing-2-gether as an intervention, a dialogue or an interview around the relationship with the child with whom they do not have a good quality relationship or with whom they don’t feel a good connection is a good first step. Describing and analyzing difficult situations or episodes that happened in class, concentrating on the child’s and teacher’s emotional experiences, and on teacher’s practices could be a helpful starting point. We recommend the Teacher-Relationship Interview (Pianta, 1999) as a good tool to start reflection on the teacher-child relationship quality. Inspired by this interview, we leave some examples that could prompt analyses and reflection: “Describe your relationship with this child in three words and elaborate using concrete examples”; “Describe a situation that you felt connected with the child”; “Describe a situation you did not have a good contact with the child”; “Which situations in the school day are difficult for the child?” In the website (section “Stories”), you can find fragments of initial interviews to teachers involved in our project, talking about their initial perceptions and experiences with particular children.

The training of the Playing-2-gether proceeds with an attentive focus on the Playing-2-gether skills. Before implementing these skills in class, it's important for the trainees to carry out a **preparation** that should encompass:

- i) Gaining knowledge about the theoretical underpinnings of Playing-2-gether (see expert videos in section "Why?" of the website, as well as the section "Publications");
- ii) Analyzing each Playing-2-gether skill, through its description and through the video fragments that are integrated in the section "P2G skills" of the website. Discussion around the role of the adult and the child's reactions should be carefully taken into account.

Once the trainees know what the Playing-2-gether skills involve, they choose one or two skills to start with. As stated before, videofeedback is a core part of the training process. It is therefore necessary to ask the parents' consent for collecting video footage. This is an ethical procedure that should be safeguarded. When the parents give their consent, the trainees plan two or three Playing-2-gether sessions in the week schedule for playing with the child. Playing-2-gether sessions should be carefully prepared. In the section "How?" of the website, several guidelines are presented about the organization of Playing-2-Gether in the class, as well as in the FAQ section of this manual.

When everything is prepared for the training, the trainee starts a training process that lasts about 6 to 10 weeks, in which there is an alternation of 'practicing' and 'coaching sessions'. In periods of practicing, the trainees realize Playing-2-gether sessions with the child, in which they try to be sensitive and follow the child's lead in the play. For about two or three weeks, the trainees experiment with the skills they have selected for that period and notice what happens. One or two of these sessions are recorded on video. In order to have good quality and sound, it is important to pay attention to some technical details, such as the position of the camera and the protection from (too much) noise.

After the weeks of practice, a coaching session is planned. Departing from selected video fragments, the coaching session consists of careful observation, analysis and reflection. After each coaching session, the trainees practice further with the same or different skills and the same procedure repeats. In general, three or four coaching sessions can make a good

training process. It is important to round up the training with a final section in which the trainees reflect on the changes in the relationship they have with the child. It's important to stress that the training process is not linear and should adapt to the trainee's needs and circumstances. For example, an initial tendency has been identified for the trainees to focus on applying the skills in the "correct" way. However, a growing focus on the child and on the relationship, considering verbal and non-verbal cues, is paramount.

3.2. PROTOCOL FOR USING THE VIDEOFEEDBACK METHOD AS A COACHING TOOL

As became clear in the previous section, videofeedback is a very relevant coaching tool throughout the training process. In the following paragraphs you find a videofeedback protocol for Playing-2-gether that was developed in 2014 by Maai Huyse and Caroline Vancraeyveldt in UC Leuven-Limburg Belgium, for the preservice training of preschool teachers (more information on this is available in the website, section Teacher Training – Preservice). Importantly, this protocol is designed to be used by a coach (e.g., a teacher trainer) for a coaching process in a group of 8 preservice students. However, it can be adapted to other training circumstances, for example where colleagues work together as peers on professionalization in Playing-2-gether. In that case, one of the peers takes the role of trainee and the other the role of coach. Later on, they swap roles. Even if the Playing-2-gether team hasn't experimented this more horizontal type of training in this particular project, we acknowledge its potential and possibilities for collaborative learning.

Each student shows one video fragment of his/her implementation of Playing-2-gether. This video fragment is discussed in group under supervision of the teacher trainer/coach. After this discussion, another student shares a video fragment which is again discussed in group.

It is important that the students feel safe to discuss the video fragments. In the beginning of the coaching session, the trainer should make the students feel at ease. The trainer stresses that the information that is shared in the session is confidential. Also the students can choose which fragments they share with the coach and with the other students.

For example, students can choose whether they show the video fragments they are proud of or that they are not proud of.

- 1) Trainee **situates** briefly the video fragment that he/she chose to share (2’)

Coach asks:

- *“Can you situate the fragment? Can you explain why you chose this fragment in particular?”*
- *“What do you want to tell the group before they see the fragment?”*

- 2) The other trainees are asked to write down what they notice while watching the fragment. This can be about Playing-2-gether, but it can also include other things that stand out.

- 3) Watch fragment (5’)

- 4) **First impressions** of the fragment (10’): “What did you notice when watching this fragment?”

Trainees bring something to the discussion and others can join in. At this point, coaching starts primarily from what the trainees say, and the coach builds further on this. If the conversation does not start immediately or if the reaction is superficial, you can use the questions below:

- If it's a proud fragment, you can ask the trainee:
 - *“What makes you feel proud of this fragment?”*
 - *“What are you proud of exactly?”*
 - *“Are you pleased with everything, or are there elements that you would like to do differently?”*
- Return to the group: *“What does the group think of this?”*; *“Do you agree with the elements that the trainee mentions?”*
- If it's a less proud fragment, you can ask the trainee:

- *“What could have gone better?”*
- *“What did you want to do?”*
- *“What made this difficult?”* (elements outside of yourself, elements related to you)
- *“Do you think there were things that went well?”*
- Return to the group: *“What does the group think of this?”; “Do you agree with the elements that the trainee mentions?”*

Afterward, another open question can be asked, and you can move on to the **thorough analysis**.

5) **Thorough analysis** of the fragment (10’)

- Greater detail: questions for **the trainees/group**:
 - *“Where in the fragment do you see Playing-2-gether skills?”* + label them
 - *“What happens with the child when the trainee uses these skills?”*
 - *“What do you think the child feels/experiences at this point? “*
 - *“How does the trainee react to this?”*
 - *“Is this the same as what trainee X mentions? What makes you see things differently?”*
- Return to the **group**: *“Did the other trainees experience something similar? Did they handle something differently? Tips?”*
- The teacher-child relationship
 - For the **trainee**: *“How did you experience the relationship with the child/children during your internship? Did this change during or after the Playing-2-gether activities?”*
 - For the trainee: *“Did you manage to respond sensitively to the child/children outside of the sessions as well, to take their*

*relationship needs into account, ...? How did you experience this?
Added value?"*

- Return to the **group**: *"How did this go for you?"*
- During the discussion, you can keep the following questions in mind:

What did the trainee want?

What did the child/children want?

What did the trainee do?

What did the child/children do?

What did the trainee think?

What did the child/children think?

What did the trainee feel?

What did the child/children feel?

6) What else did you learn? (apart from Playing-2-gether) (5'')

- For the **trainee**: *"You have watched the fragment a few times now. Outside of the use of Playing-2-gether, have you learned other things?"*
 - about yourself as a future teacher
 - about how you deal with children
 - about children
 - about the teacher-child relationship
 - ...
- For the **group**: *"Are there elements that stand out to you, outside of the use of Playing-2-gether?"*

7) Rounding up (3'')

- Everyone answers the following question:
"What is the most important thing I'll take away from this discussion?"

3.3. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

1) Are you playing with only one preschooler or more?

That depends on your focus.

✓ If you want to **try out the Playing-2-gether skills**, you can focus on any child. For example, you play on the road rug and imitate the behavior of just one child. If you notice that this child does not like this, you can imitate the behavior of another child in the course of the activity.

❖ Other children may also be playing in the corner where you are practicing Playing-2-gether. They can also join in. You can change your focus to other children if you want to.

❖ You don't always have to do Playing-2-gether with the same children. You can practice any skill with other children.

✓ If you want to focus on building a qualitative teacher-child relationship with a child with whom you have difficulties, it is important that you schedule Playing-2-gether regularly with this child. You can choose to work with this child alone, or in small groups of children. You will then mainly focus on your bond with this one child.

2) What is the best time to Play-2-Gether?

The best thing to do is to **schedule Playing-2-gether into the weekly or daily school timetable**, preferably **during free play moments**. You will consciously try out one or more Relationship-Game skills in a specific corner of the classroom. Read question 4 for more information about the corners or activities that are suitable for Playing-2-gether.

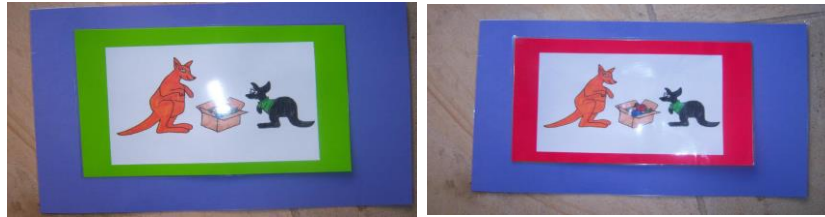
Relationship-Game skills such as **observing, labeling feelings and taking into account relational needs** can occur **throughout the entire day**. Do not limit yourself to the scheduled Playing-2-gether moments.

3) Where in the classroom should Playing-2-gether take place?

✓ If you apply Playing-2-gether when you are alone in the classroom, you create a **well-defined and central spot in the classroom**. This way you can oversee the other children so that intervention remains possible and you can still focus on one or more children. If the

children experience the teacher as sufficiently present, there is less chance of the children behaving annoying.

✓ Instruct the children to first help each other before disturbing the teacher. You can also use **pictograms** to support such agreements. For example, you can mark out the Playing-2-gether corner or use pictograms to indicate whether the Playing-2-gether corner is "open" or "closed".



4) Which corners or activities are suitable for Playing-2-gether?

✓ Some classroom activities, such as storytelling or gymnastics lessons, are less suitable for Playing-2-gether, as Playing-2-gether focuses on one-on-one interaction.

✓ Make sure you take a good look at the **interests and needs of the child(ren)**! Make sure that interaction is possible. Avoid activities that are too difficult and also too passive or individual such as solving puzzles, looking at picture books, ..., unless the child explicitly asks for this.

✓ You can make a **Playing-2-gether box**, with changing content. The child(ren) can choose the toys which are in this box.



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