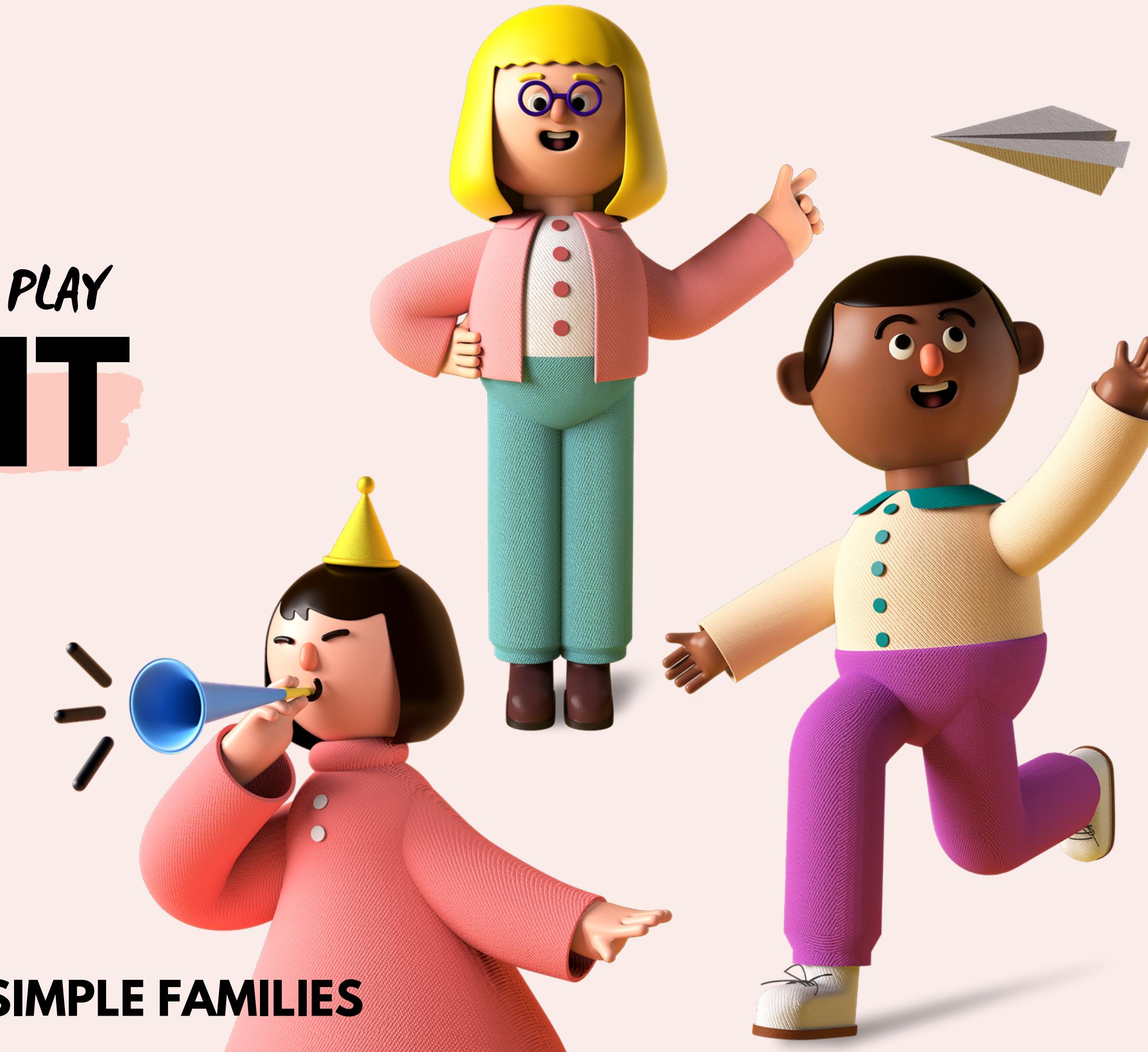




FOSTERING INDEPENDENT PLAY **TOOL KIT**



SIMPLE FAMILIES

FIVE TOOLS TO FOSTER INDEPENDENT PLAY

Start here. Meet your child right where they are. When it comes to any area of child-rearing, it's easy to set arbitrary expectations. Play is no exception. Typically, these expectations are based on comparisons.

If you have a friend with a child that plays alone in her room for hours, you may feel like your kid should be able to do the same. If your friend's son spends extended time lining up blocks and making race tracks for his cars, you expect your son can enjoy the same.

The first step is to lose the expectations. Start right here where your child is at today—not where you think they "should be."

Watch for success. Pay attention to your own confirmation bias. *Confirmation bias* presents itself when we seek evidence that confirms our existing beliefs.

If you believe your child isn't capable of playing alone, you will notice all the times he/she comes and hangs on your leg asking for you to join. This bias can prevent us from noticing the times when our children are, in fact, playing independently.

Remember, look for success. Your might already be doing better than you know. You gotta believe.



NATURE VS. NURTURE

If your child struggles to play independently, you may fear you've done something wrong. *But rest assure independent play is as much about nature as it is nurture. Please, I beg you, drop the self-blame.* This isn't a problem you've caused, but it is something you can help to foster moving forward.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Throughout childhood, their brains will continue to develop. Many of the behaviors and challenges you see are related to the fact that your growing child is very much "a work in progress.". There are cognitive skills which are important to be able to play independently, such as attention span, problem-solving, and executive functioning. These skills will allow your child to have play ideas, plan/organize those play ideas, and execute them. You'll see all these skills grow naturally with age, but some children benefit from extra support.

OPPORTUNITY

Kids need lots of opportunities and practice for independent play. That's where we are going to focus the rest of this tool kit! Consider the following five tools to be the building blocks of independent play. **With these tools together, you will see slow and steady progress in your home. Remember, there's no magic bullet!**



QUIET TIME

Most kids need practice spending time alone. Quiet time can be an excellent way to provide structure for alone time.

Trust me, there is value for both the parent and child spending quiet time alone in a safe room. I nearly gave up on this concept for a few years, but recently brought it back for my kids and it's been invaluable. They have learned to sit with their thoughts and make use of a few simple toys in their bedrooms each day. In our house, the kids practice 30 minutes of quiet time.

This practice that occurs during quiet time helps to support the independent play that happens outside of quiet time. It's a building block for independent play. If you want to get this started in your house, listen to Episode 208 (<http://simplefamilies.com/episode208/>) on the Simple Families podcast.



MASTERLY INACTIVITY



Masterly inactivity is a tool that is used across disciplines, from education to medicine. *In essence, it means watchful waiting.* When we practice masterly inactivity, we step back and allow our children to interact with the world...without our praise, encouragement, or interruptions (even the well-intentioned ones!). *I find it most comfortable to practice masterly inactivity when I step out of the room yet remain within earshot.*

Imagine it like a child learning to swim. When they learn to swim, it looks awkward at first. There is a bit of a struggle which can make us feel uneasy as parents. It takes practice for them to acquire the skills to swim more gracefully, for longer periods of time. But if we jumped in and pulled them out each time their head dunked underwater, they wouldn't have the opportunity to practice doing it for themselves.

So we have to stand aside and give them space. We have to allow them to fumble and get bored. It won't happen overnight; this process takes time and practice for both you and the child.

FIND + HONOR YOUR BOUNDARIES

As parents, when we have our own boundaries, we are also setting expectations for our children's behavior. For example, when we tell our children we need some personal space, we are setting the expectation that they leave our side and pursue their own interests.

We often fear disappointment and sadness in our children. As a result, we fail to prioritize our own personal boundaries. Instead, we have to clearly communicate our expectations around personal boundaries.

You need to practice alone time. You need personal space. You need to say no to requests to play.

When you communicate clear boundaries to your child, you are creating opportunities for your child to act and play independently. Our children need to see us advocate for our own well-being. They need to see us acting as humans who are separate from them in many ways. Not only does it protect our mental health, but it also invites them to find other ways to spend their time while we are focused on other tasks.



SET THE SPACE

When children are young, they may struggle to access materials to play independently. It's important that toys/play items are in a place that is easy to access. Imagine if I told you, "Go play!" You might sit paralyzed thinking...Well, where do I start? What do I choose? How do I play with it? There are many decisions to be made. It's far easier to get inspired when you glance at an item sitting on a shelf in open sight.

These decisions are simpler when the toys/play tools are in open sight. If items are sitting out on a shelf, they will spark your child's imagination and get used far more often. If the toys are buried in a toy box, they may be forgotten about or damaged.

How can you arrange your space so that your children can easily see and reach the items for play? The more this is done, the less they will need you to help. (We will talk more about this in *Foundations!*)



PLAY INVITATIONS

It can be transformative when we set the space to be more accessible to children.

But some children *still* struggle to get started with play. It's not easy you know—first they have to identify an idea for the play. Then they have to make plans with the materials to use. After that they have to decide which steps to take and which order to use the materials.

For example:

1. Decide to build a castle.
2. Get out the blocks.
3. Pick the shape of the castle and start building.
4. Complete the castle, search for characters to place in the castle to play with—maybe animals or people.
5. Lastly, invent a storyline for what the characters will do in the castle.

It's a lot of steps, right? If your child is still developing their planning and organizing skills (as most are!) then they might get stuck in one or more of these steps. Play invitations will help them to get started so they aren't held up in one of the many steps in the process.

Think about play invitations like this: **How can you help get them started?** For the castle example, you could get out the blocks and start the foundation of the castle. Then invite them to come and finish it. You might set a few favorite characters next to the castle to make it easier to launch into pretend play once the castle is finished. *Then practice Masterly inactivity and slip away!*

MORE EXAMPLES TO GET STARTED:

- Get out wood blocks/cars and make the start of a race track.
- Use painters tape on the floor and create a design for a balance walk or a maze.
- Get out a puzzle and put together 25% of the pieces, leaving the rest out of the table to finish.
- Tape a large sheet of fresh paper to the wall and place a set of crayons next to it.
- Set up a new train track design.

Hint: Pinterest has some great simple ideas for play invitations!

