Activities and Guidance for Children in Crisis

For Parents and Community Supports

Developed by:

The International Play Association IPAWORLD.org

The American Association for Promoting the Child's Right to Play (IPAUSA.ORG)

UNICEF New York (2007)

Emergency Task Force

Program Division

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Part One: Communicating with Children in Emergency Situations
- Part Two: Organizing Play Activities for Children
- Play as a Foundation for Learning and a Tool for Healing
- Playing with Children Birth through Eight
- Creating a Safe Play Environment
- Creating a Daily Play Program for Children in Times of Emergencies
- Focusing on Fun and Safe Play
- Ways to Begin Play Activities with Older Children
- Sample Formations for Play
- Part Three: Suggested Play Activities Using Little or No Materials
- Sample Playthings Made from Locally Available Resources
- Imaginative Play Activities
- Nature Play Activities
- The Importance of Children's Right to Play
- Learn More About IPA USA
- Part Five: Helpful Websites

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG CHILDREN IN CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES

INTRODUCTION

This document provides a comprehensive framework for supporting and enriching the play experiences of young children, particularly in challenging circumstances, including natural disasters, life-threatening emergencies, regular disruption of the child's routine, or other unexpected events. By exploring various types of play—imaginative, nature-based, rhythmic, and physical—educators and caregivers can foster resilience, promote healthy development, and ensure that all children have access to meaningful, joyful learning opportunities. The following chapters provide practical guidance, modifications for inclusivity, and resources for extending play beyond traditional settings, underscoring the critical importance of play in the holistic development of every child.

NATURE OF EMERGENCIES AFFECTING CHILDREN

Natural disasters, life-threatening emergencies, or other incidents are any event that disrupts the child's normal living situation and requires the assistance of an adult to ensure the child's survival or continued healthy development. Sample emergencies could include the ongoing traumas of war, violence in schools, neighborhoods, or public places, lacking basic human needs, such as food or shelter, immigrating from countries where violence is prevalent, or having one's community undergo a natural disaster stemming from weather conditions or terrorism.

PROVISION OF CARE AND RECOVERY

In all emergencies, trained adults and volunteers provide for a child's basic survival, including food, shelter, clothing, and ongoing education. For example, UNICEF addresses the special needs of young children by supporting the development of Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers and establishing equivalent settings in temporary settlements. These centers and settings assist the child's recovery and rehabilitation. They also help mothers and caregivers cope with and overcome feelings of stress and helplessness.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND LEARNING IN CRISIS

UNICEF also recognizes that specialized training is needed to provide for the child's emotional needs during times of crisis, instability, and violence. UNICEF created the Early Childhood Developmental Kit to help adults organize learning and play activities for children exposed to emergencies. Caregivers can be older children, parents, teachers, or other trained individuals who provide opportunities for young children to continue learning and playing while developing their ability to cope with various situations.

ADVOCACY FOR THE RIGHT TO PLAY

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play, IPA/USA (IPAUSA.org) is the national affiliate of the International Play Association (IPA) World. The purpose of this organization is to protect, preserve, and promote play as a fundamental right for all humans. Membership is open to any individual, group, or organization that endorses the child's right to play.

This is stated in the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), and highlighted in Article 7, paragraph 3, which states: "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right..." and in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Article 31, which asserts:

- States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
- States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life. They shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activities.

In the face of adversity, play emerges not only as a right but as a lifeline for children navigating the turbulence of crises. Far beyond a simple distraction, play becomes an essential bridge to recovery, fostering resilience, restoring a sense of normalcy, and enabling children to process their experiences in a safe and nurturing environment. Whether improvising games in makeshift shelters or finding solace in familiar routines, children instinctively turn to play to reclaim moments of joy and connection amid uncertainty.

Play is woven into the very fabric of childhood, supporting adaptation and growth even when the world feels unpredictable. Through playful interactions, whether structured activities or spontaneous moments, children build supportive relationships, master new skills, and rediscover hope. For caregivers, enabling play is a powerful means of supporting healing and fostering community, reinforcing the idea that, even in the direst circumstances, every child deserves the freedom to imagine, explore, and thrive.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN CHILDHOOD (ADAPTED FROM IPAWORLD.ORG)

CHILDREN AND THEIR ESSENTIAL NEEDS

Child-led play is a biological necessity for healthy development. Throughout history and across all cultures, children have always engaged in play. Alongside basic needs such as nutrition, health, shelter, and education, play is vital in supporting each child's ability to reach their potential, gifted at conception.

THE ROLE AND NATURE OF PLAY

Play serves as a form of communication and self-expression that combines thought and action. It brings children satisfaction and a sense of achievement. Play is instinctive, voluntary, and spontaneous.

BENEFITS OF PLAY

Through play, children develop physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Play is not simply a way to pass time; it is an essential means of learning to live.

www.ipaworld.org (Adapted by IPAUSA, 2025)

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH TRAUMA, LOSS, AND EMERGENCIES

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to provide individuals with guidance on comforting children and fostering effective communication, with a focus on the healing and developmental power of storytelling, art, and play. It also outlines principles for organizing play activities and lists resources and materials to aid caregivers in challenging circumstances.

This guide helps children process challenging events and emotions. By focusing on body language, honest communication, and attentive listening, caregivers can foster resilience and healing in children, particularly when play and creative engagement are integral to their approach.

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

IN AN EMERGENCY, GET DOWN ON THE CHILD'S LEVEL

Caregivers can open or enhance communication by adjusting their physical stances, kneeling, or bending down to the child's level. Speaking calmly, making eye contact, and showing genuine interest will help build trust. Children often sense and internalize the emotions of adults, so caregivers need to reassure children that they are not responsible for any adult's fear, anger, feelings, or distress.

AVOID MINIMIZING CHILDREN'S LOSS

When children face loss, they may experience and display intense emotions. They need to understand that expressing deep sadness or strong emotions is perfectly acceptable. Dismissing or ignoring these emotions will not alleviate their distress or aid in their recovery. Adults should respect children's feelings and offer reassurance that their reactions are normal. Children may find that upsetting images and fears return repeatedly and with great intensity, which is a typical response. Older children might worry that their reactions mean something is wrong with them. Caregivers should accept children's feelings without judgment, impatience, ridicule, or teasing.

ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS THROUGH WORDS

During emergencies, young children often feel a wide range of emotions but may not have the words to express them directly. Their feelings may manifest as crying or emotional outbursts. Adults can help by providing vocabulary to name these feelings, such as "troubled," "concerned," "worried," "scared," "shocked," "mad," or "angry." Teaching children the words to describe their emotions helps them process what they are going through and can be comforting and healing.

OFFER SIMPLE AND HONEST EXPLANATIONS

Children need clear, truthful explanations about events that disrupt their lives. Providing reasons for emergencies—such as natural disasters or harmful actions—helps children feel a sense of control and understanding. Caregivers should avoid secrecy and share information in small, age-appropriate portions, repeating explanations as often as needed. Listening carefully and being prepared to stop other activities to give the child full attention when they are ready to talk is essential.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN HEALING AND DEVELOPMENT

Play is a powerful tool for children's learning, problem-solving, creativity, and physical development. It is a universal activity that reflects culture and tradition and is central to healthy development. Play is especially valuable during emergencies because:

- It serves as a universal way for children to process their experiences
- It expresses love and provides comfort during stressful times.
- It brings joy to both children and caregivers.
- It helps children find meaning and pleasure even in crisis.
- It gives caregivers opportunities to support and praise children naturally.
- It helps resolve issues between caregivers and children.
- It passes on cultural values and traditions.
- It utilizes readily available natural materials.
- It encourages focus and concentration, helping children manage stress effectively.
- It allows caregivers to observe how children are managing stress.
- For children to gain the benefits of play, adults should follow the child's lead in play rather than direct activities.

Playing with caregivers who participate as equals, rather than leaders, builds positive memories. Maintaining family traditions and connections with extended family also strengthens relationships.

PLAY ACTIVITIES FOR DIFFERENT AGES

Infants are curious and eager to explore. Caregivers should engage with them by looking, talking, singing, making facial expressions, and holding them to stimulate their senses. In the first year, movement-based play is key.

One-year-olds enjoy making and listening to sounds, copying facial expressions, and exploring play objects. Caregivers should provide safe items for them to touch, hold, taste, and explore.

Two-year-olds like sorting and dumping objects, playing with caregivers, and imitating others.

Three- and four-year-olds have vivid imaginations. They make up stories, act them out, and use simple props in play. They enjoy listening to stories, drawing, playing with clay, singing, and moving to music, as well as simple games of chase.

Children ages five to eight still enjoy games, which become more organized and challenging at this stage.

Indoors, adults should ensure a safe play area by removing glass items, padding sharp corners, covering unused sockets, cleaning floors, and keeping small or hazardous objects out of reach.

PLAY AND SAFE ENVIRONMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

PLAY ACROSS EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Infants explore their surroundings through sensory play—looking, listening, and being held.
- One-year-olds enjoy creating sounds, mimicking adults, and manipulating objects.
- Two-year-olds enjoy sorting and dumping items, engaging with caregivers, and imitating others.
- Three- and four-year-olds use their imagination in storytelling, crafts, singing, and movement activities.
- Children aged five to eight enjoy more organized and challenging games.

CREATING A SAFE PLAY ENVIRONMENT INDOORS

- Remove glass items and cover sharp corners.
- Secure electrical outlets and ensure floors are clean.
- Eliminate small objects that could be swallowed.
- Keep hazardous substances, such as cleaning fluids and medicines, out of reach.
- Prioritize interactive, child-led play with others instead of screen time.

CREATING A SAFE PLAY ENVIRONMENT OUTDOORS

- Provide enough space for children to move freely, avoiding obstacles and collisions.
- Maintain adequate supervision and check for hazards, such as rocks or tree branches, that could cause falls.
- Provide areas that include shade and clean drinking water.
- Ensure all children remain in clear view for supervision.

UNDERSTANDING RISK AND HAZARD

- A hazard is a danger in the environment that is beyond a child's understanding and could cause injury.
- Risk refers to a challenge or uncertainty that a child can recognize and choose to engage with.
- Risk-taking is a natural and essential part of early childhood development.

THE VALUE OF RISK PLAY

Taking valuable risks helps children develop:

- Awareness of their abilities
- Judgment and decision-making skills
- An understanding of consequences
- Coordination and dexterity
- Resourcefulness and creativity
- Confidence and independence

SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN RISK PLAY

Support children by allowing them to explore and challenge themselves. Never force a child into situations that make them uncomfortable. Observe to determine if more support or greater challenges are needed. Assess risks by considering the likelihood and severity of harm, the benefits of the activity, and whether the child is enjoying themselves or feeling scared.

MANAGING HAZARDS

Risky play does not mean leaving children unattended. Adults must remain responsible for removing hazards such as sharp edges, fragile items, choking hazards, and access to dangerous areas, while still allowing the child sufficient freedom appropriate to their abilities.

IDEAS FOR ORGANIZING PLAY SPACES

If possible, set up dedicated areas for dramatic play, art, building (blocks), sensory activities, and games with balls for older children.

ORGANIZING AND SUPPORTING PLAY FOR CHILDREN

ADULT SUPERVISION AND SAFETY

Risky play does not mean leaving children unattended. Adults remain responsible for removing hazards, including sharp edges, fragile items, choking hazards, and access to dangerous areas, while allowing freedom appropriate to each child's abilities. Whenever possible, create dedicated areas for dramatic play, art, building (blocks), sensory activities, quiet areas with books, puppets, or stuffed animals, and areas for active group games for older children.

SAMPLE PLAY MATERIALS FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

- Infants (six to twelve months): Avoid choking hazards.
- One- to two-year-olds: Avoid choking hazards.
- Two- to three-year-olds: Avoid choking hazards.
- Three- to five-year-olds: Squeeze toys, pull toys, yarn balls, rocking horses, kites, mobiles, plastic bowling sets, wagons, rhythm instruments, climbing ropes, floor mirrors, beanbags, light wheelbarrows, wading pools, jump ropes, snap-lock beads, activity tables, tricycles, low stilts, lightweight paddles, pat mats, tunnels, foam balls, Velcro mittens.
- Things to ride on: feet-propelled toys, ride-on vehicles, low scooters and wagons, bouncing tubes, beach balls, push-and-pull toys resembling adult tools, tricycles or other pedal-powered vehicles, lightweight bats and balls, paddle racquets, ribbon wands, and scarves.
- Older children: Full-size scooters, climbing platforms, large balls, play barrels, junior sports equipment, scooter boards, potato sacks, hopscotch mats, low seesaws, and rock climbing walls.
- Large parachute
- 9" colored cones
- 4' by 6' tumbling mats
- Rubber balls
- Low balance beam or boards
- Paddles and badminton birdies
- Makers Table with art supplies: clay, playdough, popsicle sticks, plastic knives, cookie cutters, paintbrushes, new toothbrushes, natural materials such as small branches with leaves, flowers, etc.
- Sidewalk chalk
- Boxes and tape
- Sheets for fort-building or spray painting with spray bottles filled with tempera paint and water
- Loose parts: leaves, cardboard boxes, sales papers, pine needles, pinecones, sticks, flowers, acorns, rocks, shells, grass blades
- Assorted crafting supplies
- Building blocks, nuts and bolts, PVC pipe scraps
- Water, bike tires, wading pools (for ball pits, shredded paper pits, etc.)

Always watch for choking hazards.

CREATING A DAILY PLAY PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES

Children feel more secure during emergencies when routines are maintained. A consistent *yet flexible* schedule provides predictability and security. Adults should follow children's lead to determine when to move on to the next activity and in the routine, plan for extended periods of child-led play. Teacher-initiated activities are acceptable, but children should have the choice to participate. Adults should engage with children during play, supporting but not intruding.

FOCUSING ON FUN AND ENCOURAGING POSITIVE PLAY BEHAVIOR

Children may sometimes misbehave while playing. Caregivers are responsible for safety, but should preserve the fun of play. To help prevent discipline issues and encourage good behavior, caregivers can:

- Create a quiet signal, such as raising a hand, to get the group's attention.
- Explain each child's role or expectations during play.
- Promote harmonious play among all children.
- Praise specific positive behaviors (e.g., "You were so kind to your friend").
- Ensure everyone has a turn and an opportunity to play.
- Reinforce safety rules (take turns, be kind and gentle).
- Teach conflict resolution skills (ask what happened, how the child felt, what they tried, what they need to do, and whether it's a good or bad choice; offer support).

With older children, offer more responsibility, praise self-control, and listening skills. If inappropriate behavior occurs, ask the child to take a break and allow them to rejoin when ready, reminding them what to do differently next time. Avoid physical punishment or humiliation, such as moving their clip from green to yellow or red, pulling a card, or using another humiliating disciplinary method.

SUPPORTING POSITIVE PLAY AND CREATIVE USE OF MATERIALS

SAMPLE FORMATIONS FOR PLAY

- Behind Line: Children line up so each looks at the back of the head of the one in front.
- Side-by-Side Line: Children stand shoulder to shoulder, stretching the line if there is crowding.
- Personal Space: Each child chooses a spot where they cannot touch others or objects nearby.
- Triangle: Groups of three children form a triangle, facing inward.
- Circle with Caregiver: The Caregiver joins children in a circle formation.
- One Body Length Apart: Children space themselves so that their arms do not touch others during activities that require spacing.

WAYS TO BEGIN PLAY ACTIVITIES WITH OLDER CHILDREN

There are various methods to start a game or select an "It" player for children ages 5-8:

- Flipping a Coin: The Caregiver flips a coin, and the correct guesser is chosen.
- Hiding the Pebble: Children guess which hand conceals the pebble to be selected.
- Picking Sticks or Straws: Children draw, and the one with the shortest stick is chosen.
- Hand on the Stick: Players stack their fists on a stick; the player in the top position starts the game.
- The Last Stick or Straw: Children pick from a pile, and the one left with the last piece is chosen.

SUGGESTED PLAY ACTIVITIES USING LITTLE OR NO MATERIALS

THE HEALING ROLE OF STORYTELLING, ART, AND PLAY

Storytelling: Storytelling helps children process stressful or traumatic experiences. Children can recount their stories, starting with events before the emergency, what happened during it, and imagining an ending. Storytelling supports language and expressive development and can involve sentence completion or using dolls as story characters.

Drawing and Painting: Through drawing and painting, children express mental images of real or imagined events. These creative activities can prompt discussions and offer relief from fears by allowing individuals to express their feelings visually, especially when language is limited.

Play: Play allows children to imitate family roles, interact with peers, explore, and invent. These activities are vital for restoring normalcy and providing joy, particularly for children affected by emergencies or losses.

EXAMPLES OF SIMPLE PLAY ACTIVITIES

- Squeeze Toy: Sew two fabric shapes together, stuff with soft material, and stitch closed to make a soft toy.
- Box Blocks: Fill empty containers with crumpled newspaper and seal them shut with tape to create building blocks.
- Picture Puzzle: Paste or draw a picture on cardboard, varnish it, and then cut it into pieces to create a homemade puzzle.
- Hand Puppets: Use an old sock, decorate it with a face and a name, and use it as a puppet.

CREATIVE PLAY IDEAS USING EVERYDAY MATERIALS

STONES (ROCKS, PEBBLES)

Stones can be used for a variety of creative activities. They are perfect for art projects, building pathways, collecting, painting, and even hiding, allowing others to discover them. Children can use them as stepping stones, game pieces, for skipping across water, or for drawing on rocks. Gluing small rocks together can form unique pictures or miniature sculptures.

ROPE

Rope lends itself to imaginative play as a snake, a fire hose, a wavy river, a tree vine, or a circus tightrope. Children can also use ropes to create shapes, numbers, letters, or various objects. Jump rope increases physical activity.

BARRELS

Barrels offer many opportunities: children can roll, sit on, balance on top of, or crawl through them. Arranging barrels end-to-end creates tunnels, while upright barrels may be used as drums or tables. An open barrel might transform into a spaceship, clubhouse, or cave.

Always check for sharp edges or hazardous materials before use.

TIRES

Tires can become swings, hiding spots, obstacle courses, or quiet nooks. Children can jump into or over them, crawl through, roll them, or imagine them as stores, clubhouses, or buildings in a play area.

MUD

Mud is ideal for making mud pies, drawing, digging, sculpting, painting, or creating footprints and tracks.

SAND

Sand provides an endless source of entertainment—digging, drawing, building castles, searching for hidden treasures, creating roads, filling containers, forming sand art, making wet sand sculptures, or burying pretend treasure.

CARPET SQUARES

Carpet squares can be anything a child imagines: magic carpets, islands, blankets, houses, wagons, sleds, icebergs, cars, boats, or buses.

BUCKETS

Buckets serve many roles: hats, stilts, carrying containers, seats, sand or water toys, helmets, musical instruments, or targets for tossing games.

HAY

Hay bales invite climbing, rolling, tossing, building scarecrows, forming caves, constructing houses, forts, or fences.

DIRT

Children can bulldoze, dig, hunt for insects, build, design, make roads, slide, carry, or mix dirt to make mud for play.

WATER

Water play includes painting with leaves or brushes, digging in rivers, splashing, testing what floats or sinks, filling and emptying containers, digging holes to see if water stays, swimming, mixing dirt with water to make mud, or washing toys.

LADDERS

Ladders can be turned into trains, bridges, firefighter props, climbing equipment, or used for balancing and imaginative construction play.

BRICKS

Bricks are helpful for stacking, staging toy figures, building walls or buildings for miniature cars, creating walkways, or making patterns.

CONCLUSION

These inventive play activities—ranging from climbing games and homemade toys to creative acting and makeshift sports—illustrate the endless possibilities for play, regardless of setting or resources. Such activities not only nurture imagination and physical health but also highlight the fundamental value of play in every child's life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO PLAY

ADVOCACY FOR PLAY

Supporting this philosophy, organizations such as IPA WORLD, the American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA USA), and UNICEF champion efforts to promote and protect children's right to play. They advocate for initiatives such as recess, after-school play, and inclusive opportunities for children of all abilities, while also offering resources on play policy, research, and community engagement.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IPA USA- VISIT OUR WEBSITE IPAUSA.ORG

The American Association for the Child's Right to Play (IPA USA)- United States affiliate) of the International Play Association (IPAWORLD.org). Promotes, preserves, and protects each child's right to play. Advocates and resources for recess, after-school play, community playdays, special needs population, obesity, playwork, playground design, and more.

Visit ipausa.org for policy briefs, the 50th Anniversary Whitepaper - a collection of 57 papers written by 59 authors in eight categories, all promoting the child's right to play. ipausa.org/whitepaper

Other Initiatives

- Pop-Up Play Days
- Porch Play Chats
- National Day of Play
- International Day of Play
- Screen Free Week- screenfree.org
- Promoting Recess
- Children in Crisis Play Days
- Conferences
- Town Halls
- PlayTalk Blog
- Activities to do at home or school - under Recess and Play
- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Find our links to Instagram, Facebook, Spotify, and YouTube – top right of the ipausa.org website.

WEBSITES

- ipausa.org: Resources and advocacy for children's right to play.
- bubbles.org: All about bubbles—games, recipes, and science.
- gameskidsplay.net: Playground games, rhymes, and international traditions.
- ipaworld.org: International Play Association, promoting play as a fundamental right.
- playgroundsafety.org: Playground safety, injury prevention, and training.

- nwf.org/natureactivities: Outdoor and nature play activities.
- https://www.fantasticfunandlearning.com/loose-parts-play-kids.html Loose Parts Play
- http://www.funsci.com/fun3_en/toys/toys.htm Fun Science Gallery
- http://www.freechild.org The Freechild Project
- http://www.worldplay.org International Play Association – IPAWorld.org
- http://www.123child.com The Activity Place
- birthdaypartyideas.com: Party ideas and activities for all ages.
- http://www.familytlc.net Family TLC
- http://www.funattic.com Fun-Attic, Inc.
- http://www.funandgames.org Fun and Games.org
- http://legendsandlore.com/puppet-resource.html Legends & Lore, Inc.
- http://www.streetplay.com Streetplay.com
- http://www.teachingideas.co.uk/pe/contents.htm Teaching Ideas for Primary Teachers