



SERIES 1 · CONNECTION, SAFETY, AND BELONGING

Working Side by Side

How safe preparation, responsive support, and predictable reconnection can help independent play grow while adults remain responsible for care.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 1 - Connection, Safety, and Belonging | 19-21 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Resources for Caregivers publications provide general educational and informational material informed by research, professional literature, and caregiving practice. Every child, caregiver, family, and situation is different. The ideas are intended to support awareness, reflection, learning, and informed decision-making; they are not a substitute for individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, educational, therapeutic, legal, financial, or other professional advice.

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AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 19-21 minutes

Central idea: Independent play can grow through safe preparation, realistic expectations, responsive support, and predictable reconnection. Adult work and children's play may happen side by side, but supervision and caregiving needs remain firmly in the adult's role.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Prepare for short periods of side-by-side activity.
- 2 Choose a safe environment and developmentally appropriate materials.
- 3 Create communication rules that protect a child's access to help.
- 4 Use check-ins and reconnection to support trust and growing independence.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

SUPERVISION COMES FIRST

Independent play is **not** the same as being left unattended. The level of supervision must fit the child's age, development, abilities, activity, and environment. Infants and young children need especially close, active supervision. Childproofing reduces risk but never makes a space completely childproof. Keep water, stairs, windows, doors, heat, cords, batteries, magnets, small objects, medications, chemicals, weapons, pets, and other hazards secured. Remain able to see or hear the child as appropriate and respond promptly. A visual signal, timer, monitor, or older sibling does not replace adult supervision. If work prevents you from responding to urgent needs, arrange for another capable caregiver rather than expecting independent play to bridge the gap.

Prepare to Work Side by Side

Working from home can bring connection and strain into the same hour. One moment an adult is answering an important message; the next, a child needs help finding a stuffed animal, resolving a problem, using the bathroom, or feeling safe.

Caregivers may worry that shifting attention means falling short. Children do not need uninterrupted adult entertainment every minute, but they do need responsive care, appropriate supervision, and confidence that their signals matter.

Independent play is not a strategy for making a child disappear while an adult works. It is a developing skill supported by an environment where the child can engage safely and the adult remains available within clear, realistic limits.

This idea extends beyond paid work. Families work side by side when an adult prepares dinner, pays bills, rests, studies, tends another child, makes a necessary phone call, or completes household care.

The invitation is not *"Stay busy so I can ignore you."*

It is *"We both have something to do, and our connection continues while our attention is in different places."*

Big Idea: Independence Grows Through Supported Practice

Children do not suddenly know how to play independently for a particular length of time. Attention, play skills, communication, impulse control, and comfort with separation develop gradually and unevenly.

One child may become absorbed in building. Another may move among several activities. A child who played alone yesterday may need close connection today because of illness, change, fatigue, stress, or a developmental leap.

Two messages can support the practice:

Your play and ideas matter.

I remain your caregiver, and I will respond when you need me.

Independence and connection are not simple opposites. Children can explore on their own while remaining part of a responsive relationship.

The goal is not a child who never interrupts. It is a family rhythm in which the adult communicates honestly, the child has appropriate access to help, and short experiences can expand only when readiness and circumstances allow.

Check Needs Before Beginning

Before a work period, pause for a practical check. The familiar acronym **H.A.L.T.** - hungry, angry, lonely, tired - can be a starting point, but children's needs rarely fit four neat categories.

Consider:

- Has the child eaten recently, or is an appropriate snack needed?

- Is water available safely?
- Does the child need the bathroom or a diaper change?
- Is the child tired, ill, uncomfortable, overstimulated, or in pain?
- Would movement help before a quieter activity?
- Is there an emotional need or unresolved conflict requiring attention?
- Does the adult need food, water, medication, a break, or a revised plan?

Meeting basic needs does not guarantee uninterrupted play. Nor does an interruption prove that preparation failed. The check simply helps the family begin from a more workable place.

Start with a small moment of genuine connection suited to the child and schedule: read one short book, build for a few minutes, share a snack, cuddle if welcomed, or talk about the plan. There is no universal amount of connection that “fills a tank.” Watch how this child responds today.

Make the Plan Concrete

Young children understand a specific sequence more easily than “*I have to work for a while.*”

Explain:

- 1 what the adult will do;
- 2 what the child may choose;
- 3 where each person will be;
- 4 how the child can get help;
- 5 what will happen at the next check-in; and
- 6 what the family will do when the work period ends.

For example:

“I am going to write at this desk. You may build on the rug or look at these books. I can see and hear you. If you are hurt, scared, need the bathroom, or need help now, come tell me. When this short timer rings, I will stop and check in.”

Use a timer only if it helps the child understand the plan. Keep the first interval comfortably within what the child has already shown they can manage, and remain flexible. A timer is a cue for the adult, not a demand that the child suppress needs until it rings.

Avoid promises you cannot keep. If a meeting might run late, say what backup will happen: another caregiver will be available, or the activity will occur at a different time.

Create a Safe Shared Workspace

Choose a play area with a clear line of sight or another level of direct supervision appropriate to the child. The adult should be able to notice changes, hear calls, and reach the child promptly.

Before beginning:

- remove choking, poisoning, strangulation, burn, drowning, fall, and tip-over hazards;
- secure doors, stairs, windows, cords, outlets, furniture, and unsafe rooms as needed;
- inspect toys for damage, loose batteries, strong magnets, broken parts, or recalled products;
- keep adult work equipment, drinks, medications, bags, chargers, and confidential materials inaccessible;
- choose materials marked and suited for the child's age and abilities; and
- avoid headphones or other barriers that prevent the supervising adult from hearing the child.

A blanket fort may sound inviting, but it can obstruct supervision and introduce unstable furniture, cords, lamps, heaters, heavy blankets, or entanglement hazards. If a child wants a cozy area, create an open, visible nook using stable, age-appropriate furnishings and keep all heat sources and cords away.

Ownership still matters. Offer limited, safe choices:

- books or large building pieces;
- drawing or stickers appropriate to the child;
- a puzzle or pretend-play set;
- a mat or table; or
- one familiar activity and one optional alternative.

Too many materials can overwhelm rather than support focus. Begin with a few known options and adjust through observation.

Offer Play, Not “Busy Work”

Play has value even when it produces nothing for the household. A child does not need to complete a useful task in order for their time to matter.

Some children may enjoy a practical-life activity alongside play. Choose only tasks that are safe without continuous hands-on help:

- match clean, large socks;
- stack washcloths;
- sort large, child-safe objects by color or type;
- organize sturdy books on a low shelf;
- wipe wooden blocks with a clean, dry cloth; or
- water an accessible plant using a very small, prepared amount of water.

Avoid small container lids, sharp or breakable measuring tools, cleaning or polishing products, raw foods, water-filled vessels, plastic bags, cords, batteries, magnets, and tasks requiring the child to climb or access another room.

The activity is not meaningful because the adult calls it important. It becomes meaningful when it fits the child's interests, ability, and actual context.

Respect Different Kinds of Work

Explain adult responsibilities without elevating them above the child's play:

"I have a meeting where I will help my team solve a problem. You may build, draw, read, rest, or work on one of these activities. Afterward, we can tell each other what we did."

Do not imply that the child is responsible for the adult's job success, income, or emotional regulation. *"If you interrupt, I could lose my job"* places an adult burden on the child.

Instead, set the boundary and keep responsibility where it belongs:

"I need quiet while I listen, and I am still responsible for helping you. Here is how to tell me when you need me now."

Children can learn to respect another person's concentration while also learning that care remains available.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Practice a three- to five-minute side-by-side period when no high-stakes meeting is happening.

- Choose one familiar activity.
- Explain where you will be.
- Teach how to get help.
- End at or before the planned time.
- Reconnect briefly.

Increase time only when the child consistently appears comfortable and safe - and only as supervision requirements allow.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Is independent play appropriate for this child's age and the current environment?
- Can I actually see, hear, and respond while doing this work?
- Which need or transition might require attention first?
- Are the materials safe without repeated adult intervention?
- Is my expectation based on this child today or on what I wish were possible?

Preparation supports success, but flexibility protects the relationship.

Stay Available and Return to Connection

Teach "Interrupt Now" First

Before teaching a child how to wait, teach when **not** to wait.

The child should speak, approach, touch the adult if that is the agreed method, or otherwise get attention immediately when they:

- are hurt, ill, frightened, or feel unsafe;
- see smoke, fire, water, a spill near electricity, or another immediate hazard;
- need the bathroom or urgent physical help;
- cannot find the supervising adult;
- encounter a stranger or unexpected door or phone situation;
- see a younger child or pet in danger; or
- are unsure whether something is an emergency.

Say plainly:

“You will not be in trouble for getting my attention when you need help.”

Practice during a calm moment. Let the child rehearse approaching, using words or their communication system, and seeing the adult respond.

A child should never have to decide whether an adult's meeting is more important than safety.

Use Visual Signals Carefully

Simple gestures or visual cards may reduce unnecessary conversation for children who already understand the safety rule. They should supplement communication, never restrict it.

For example:

- **Thumbs up or a green card:** “I am okay.”
- **A wave or yellow card:** “Please check in when you reach a stopping point.”
- **Spoken words, direct approach, or the child's urgent communication signal:** “I need help now.”

Do not use a thumbs-down gesture as the only way to report danger. In a stressful moment, a child may forget the system, be out of view, or be unable to signal silently.

The adult can also communicate availability with a simple desk card:

- **Available:** You may ask me a regular question.
- **Listening:** Please use the waiting signal for non-urgent questions; interrupt for help now.

Keep the system consistent and minimal. If it creates confusion or discourages the child from asking for help, stop using it.

Build Predictable Check-Ins

Rather than expecting a child to wait through an adult-length meeting, plan brief check-ins appropriate to the child.

At a check-in:

- make eye contact if comfortable for the child or orient toward their communication;
- confirm immediate needs;
- notice what they are doing without taking over;
- restate the next short part of the plan; and
- adjust or end the work period if the arrangement is not working.

A check-in can be brief:

"I see your road reached the bookshelf. Do you need anything before I write for a few more minutes?"

Do not use praise to pressure continuation: *"You're being so good - don't ruin it now."* Describe what you notice and preserve the child's freedom to communicate a need.

Predictability builds through repeated follow-through. When the adult says the check-in will happen at a certain cue, make every reasonable effort to honor it. If plans change, acknowledge the change and provide a new clear plan.

Respond to Interruptions Without Shame

Some interruptions are urgent. Others reflect a skill still developing. A child may forget the rule, lose interest, need connection, or simply be unable to meet the expectation yet.

Respond first to safety and need. Then, if appropriate, restate the boundary:

- "You needed help opening this. I can help now, and next time we will choose something you can use independently."
- "You wanted to tell me about your drawing. I want to hear it. Put it beside me, and I will look at the next check-in."
- "Waiting was too hard today. We are ending this work period and making a different plan."

Avoid labels such as *needy*, *attention-seeking*, *disruptive*, or *bad at independent play*. Behavior offers information about the child's skills, needs, and context.

If interruptions are frequent, shorten the interval, simplify the activity, provide more direct connection, move adult work, or arrange childcare. The answer is not always more training for the child.

Make Reconnection Realistic and Warm

When the work period ends, mark the transition back to shared attention. Close or turn away from the device if possible, move near the child, and show genuine interest.

Ask one or two questions:

- What were you working on?
- What changed while you played?
- Was anything difficult?
- Would you like to show me something or keep it private?

- What should happen next?

Share a simple piece of your own experience without disclosing confidential information:

"I finished the message I was writing."

"My meeting ended, and now I am ready to hear about your building."

Reconnection does not need to be dramatic or immediate after every ordinary task. Sometimes the adult must use the bathroom, save a document, or handle another urgent need. Say what is happening and return when promised.

The valuable pattern is not perfect separation followed by a joyful performance. It is responsive repair and return: *we shift attention, we communicate, and we find one another again.*

Let Confidence Grow Through Experience

As the routine becomes familiar, some children may remain engaged longer, initiate ideas, solve more problems, or need fewer reminders. Others will develop differently or continue to prefer proximity and interaction.

Treat progress as information, not a race. Confidence grows when a child experiences manageable challenge, appropriate support, and the ability to seek help without losing approval.

The child is not learning, *"I should never need anyone."*

They are learning:

- *I can begin something on my own.*
- *I can stay with an idea for a while.*
- *I can change activities or take a break.*
- *I can ask for help.*
- *My caregiver responds and reconnects.*

That combination reflects **interdependence**: people develop individual abilities while remaining able to give, receive, and request support.

What Adults Learn Too

Working from home is not solved by a perfect activity shelf or visual signal. Paid work and caregiving can make simultaneous demands that no individual rhythm can fully reconcile.

Caregivers deserve realistic expectations and structural support. Childcare, flexible schedules, shared caregiving, protected work time, employer accommodation, community resources, and rest may be necessary. Needing these supports is not a failure of parenting or independent play.

Sometimes families work together. Sometimes they work alongside one another. Sometimes one adult needs to transfer responsibility to another caregiver so both work and care receive appropriate attention.

The goal is not flawless balance. It is honest planning, safe care, responsive relationships, and repair when the day does not unfold as hoped.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Practice the complete rhythm once when the adult's task is flexible:

- 1 Connect briefly.
- 2 Explain the plan.
- 3 Review “interrupt now.”
- 4 Work side by side for a short interval.
- 5 Check in.
- 6 End and reconnect.

Notice which part needs adjustment before using the routine during a more demanding task.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Does my child know they may always interrupt for safety and urgent needs?
- Is our visual system simple enough to remember under stress?
- Do my check-ins happen when I say they will?
- What do interruptions reveal about the plan or the child's capacity today?
- What support do I need that independent play cannot provide?

A safe rhythm protects both growing independence and reliable access to care.

Grow Independence Inside Connection

Share “Our Important Work”

Choose a calm time for a short shared work session. This is practice, not a test of whether the family can remain quiet for a prescribed length.

Invite each person to prepare one safe activity in a shared area. Someone might:

- write, draw, or read;
- build with age-appropriate materials;
- complete a puzzle;
- match socks or stack washcloths;
- organize sturdy books on a low shelf;
- water a nearby plant with a prepared amount of water; or

- rest quietly with a sensory support.

Review the safety plan and how to get help. Then work alongside one another for an interval comfortably within the youngest participant's abilities - even one or two minutes may be enough for an early attempt.

When the session ends, gather if everyone is willing and ask:

- What did you choose?
- What held your attention?
- What was challenging?
- Did you need help or a break?
- What might make the next attempt work better?

Do not require a product, a family contribution, or pride. Play, rest, observation, and incomplete work can all be valid.

Celebrate that different people did different things while remaining responsive to one another.

Give Interdependence and Focus Shared Language

Two words capture the heart of this brief:

- **Interdependence:** People contributing different strengths while also giving, receiving, and asking for support.
- **Focus:** Directing attention toward something for a period of time, then shifting or taking a break when needed.

Focus is not silent compliance or the ability to ignore discomfort. A focused child may talk through a plan, move their body, change position, use a sensory tool, or ask for help.

Use specific language:

- "You focused on that idea, took a break, and came back."
- "You asked for help when the pieces became frustrating."
- "We did different work, and we checked on one another."
- "The noise made focus difficult, so we changed the space."

These observations help children understand the strategies around attention without turning concentration into a measure of worth.

Connect Side-by-Side Work with Story

One suggested storybook connection is ***Help Mom Work from Home!*** by Diana Murray, illustrated by Cori Doerrfeld.

The story uses humor to explore the collisions between adult work and family life. It can open a conversation without implying that children are responsible for solving work-from-home pressures.

After reading, ask:

- What did each person need?

- Which parts of the plan worked, and which did not?
- How could someone ask for help?
- What would make the play area safe and comfortable?
- How did the family reconnect?
- When might another caregiver or a different schedule be necessary?

Stories can help families rehearse possibilities while keeping adult responsibilities in adult hands.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

Connection can give children confidence to explore independently.

Responsive relationships provide a foundation from which children can play, experiment, communicate, and gradually take on more responsibility. Independence grows through experience, not through abrupt withdrawal of help.

Children benefit when adults:

- prepare a safe environment;
- offer developmentally appropriate choices;
- communicate limits honestly;
- remain available for safety and care;
- respond to signals;
- allow manageable struggle without abandonment; and
- reconnect or repair when plans go wrong.

This does not mean a securely connected child will always play alone, focus for long periods, or separate easily. Temperament, neurodevelopment, disability, stress, culture, and context all matter.

Connection is not a guarantee of a particular behavior. It is part of the relational foundation that lets children practice growing abilities without having to pretend they no longer need anyone.

Try This

Notice moments when family members are already working alongside one another.

Ask yourself:

- How did I prepare my child before shifting attention?
- Was the environment safe for the level of supervision I could provide?
- Which activities invited genuine engagement?
- Could my child ask for help without shame?
- Did I keep the check-in or reunion promise?
- What adult support would make this rhythm safer and more realistic?

Instead of asking only:

“How do I keep my child busy while I work?”

Ask:

“How can we each engage in meaningful activity while care and connection remain available?”

Sometimes the answer is a short side-by-side session. Sometimes it is a different schedule or another caregiver. Both answers can reflect thoughtful care.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Write a simple three-part plan where the child can see it:

- 1 **Together:** one brief shared activity;
- 2 **Side by side:** one safe child choice while the adult completes a flexible task; and
- 3 **Together again:** one specific reunion, such as looking at the child's work, stretching, or getting a snack.

Use pictures if helpful. Keep the plan short enough that the adult can reliably follow through.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- What does growing independence look like for this particular child?
- Am I valuing play even when it does not produce something useful?
- Does focus have room for movement, communication, and breaks?
- How do we repair when I miss a signal or a plan changes?
- What does interdependence look like in our family?

Children can become more capable without becoming less connected.

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Rooted at Home develops conversation, consent, boundaries, and collaborative problem-solving. *Expanding the Circle* carries these ideas into peer relationships and accessible social experiences. *Learning Through Practice* offers a broader framework for instruction, feedback, support, and growing independence. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Independent play is a developing ability, not a childcare substitute or a measure of how secure, mature, or “good” a child is.

Adults can support it by meeting immediate needs, preparing a safe environment, offering a few appropriate choices, explaining the plan, protecting access to urgent help, checking in, and reconnecting predictably.

Children do not need constant entertainment to feel loved. They do need responsive care and supervision suited to their development and surroundings.

When work prevents that response, another caregiver or a different plan is necessary.

Connection and independence can grow together. The child can learn, *“I can explore, focus, change course, and ask for help - and my relationship remains available.”*

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

The ideas in this brief draw on play research, responsive relationships, practical-life education, environmental design, and child-safety guidance.

Play, Relationships, and Development

- 1 **American Academy of Pediatrics: The Power of Play**. Describes several forms of play and their roles in children's physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and relational development.
- 2 **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: Serve and Return**. Explains how responsive back-and-forth exchanges with caring adults form an important part of children's developmental environment.
- 3 **Maria Montessori, The Montessori Method**. Montessori describes prepared environments and purposeful activity as supports for concentration, choice, coordination, and growing independence.

Safe Environments

- 1 **U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: Childproofing Your Home.** Reviews locks, gates, outlet protection, alarms, anti-tip measures, and other safeguards while emphasizing that safety devices must be maintained and are not completely childproof.
- 2 **U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission: Child Safety - Magnet Hazards.** Warns that small, high-powered magnets can cause severe internal injury if swallowed and should be kept away from young children.

Together, these perspectives support a practical conclusion: play and growing independence benefit from responsive relationships and carefully prepared environments, but no routine or activity replaces developmentally appropriate supervision and reliable access to adult care.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

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