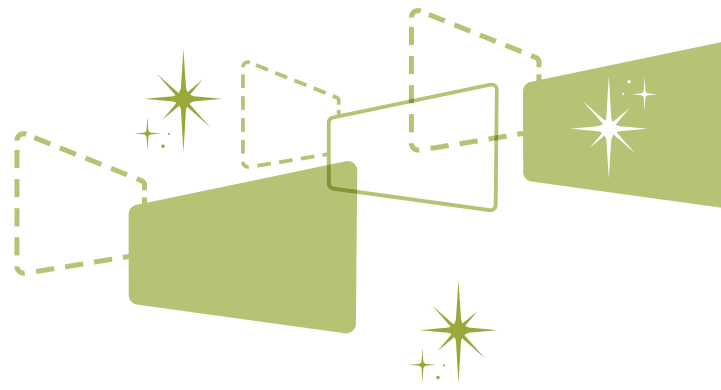




# Play Club Guide for Parents

*Learn more about our programs at [LetGrow.org](http://LetGrow.org).*



Dear Parents,

You probably have some great memories of playing as a kid.

Play may seem like a break from learning. But in fact, it's the opposite — a time of deep, intense learning cleverly disguised as fun.

Free play — play where kids decide what to do — is crucial for child development. Dr. Peter Gray, a cofounder of Let Grow and author of one of the most popular college psychology textbooks, says:

***“No amount of things we give our kids or classes we enroll them in can compensate for what they lose if we don’t allow them plenty of opportunity for free play.”*** (Check out his TEDxTalk on this topic!)

When kids make their own fun, like playing tag, they get more exercise than in adult-run sports. And when they organize their own games, from make-believe to basketball, they're learning how to communicate, compromise, cooperate, and control themselves — incredibly important social-emotional skills.

How can we give our kids this free-play advantage? If you're lucky enough to live where kids run around the neighborhood, just let your kids join them. Encourage your family, friends and neighbors to let kids spend time together without an adult calling the shots.

This packet includes tips for starting your own local Play Club, FAQ's, and a template you can copy to get the word out. We've also included instructions for some classic outdoor games.

But more important is the reminder that kids learn best when they are most engaged and excited. When adults direct an activity or solve the spats, a lot of the learning gets lost. It's the difference between being in the driver's seat or the passenger seat. The driver learns the route. The passenger...not so much.

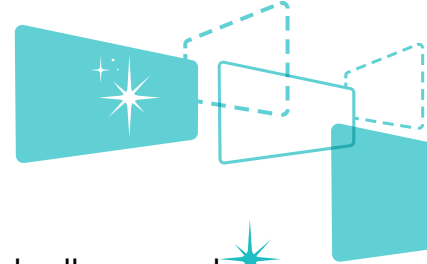
In play, kids get practice in what in the most important skill of all: being able to get along with other people.

What a gift to give our kids!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Lenore Skenazy' in a cursive, flowing script.

Lenore Skenazy, *President*

# Let Grow Play Club How-To



**GET READY!** **Enlist your families.** Make a list of friends, neighbors, and colleagues who have kids of various ages. An important component of a successful Let Grow Play Club is letting kids of all ages play together. As Dr. Peter Gray has noted: *“Mixed play offers opportunities for learning and development not present in play among those close in age.”* Young children learn more physical, mental, and social skills from older kids than they can from just their peers, but older kids learn equally important lessons in empathy and leadership when they’re with younger kids. They are also often inspired by the imagination and creativity of their younger playmates.

**PLAN.** Back when kids roamed their neighborhood, the only planning for play was deciding whose door to knock on. If you’re starting a Play Club, though, a little planning will keep everyone safe and comfortable. Here are some things you will want to figure out:

**Where?** Someone’s yard is an obvious option. Parents could possibly rotate hosting duties. The key is to not let the kids come inside! (Well, except for maybe bathroom breaks.) Is there a convenient local park or playground? A nearby place kids can walk to on their own, meeting others along the way, would be ideal. Maybe your neighborhood has a cul-de-sac or dead-end street? And empty lots have played a starring role, too!

**What supplies should be available?** Since the kids will make up their own games, use their imagination, and create their own rules, you shouldn’t need much. Loose parts are best: balls, sticks, lumber, buckets, scarves, an old suitcase, cardboard boxes, tires — anything that could serve many purposes. Junk! And chalk! Kids will get creative with whatever is available. You might want to put together a Play Club bin to take with you if you are using a public place, and kids can always bring things from home. It’s always smart to have a basic first-aid kit and sanitizer available. But don’t make it complicated.

**When?** You can easily do a trial run first or set up a regular schedule, maybe weekly. How long each Play Club lasts is up to you — or, really, the kids. Start with at least 90 minutes so they get into the flow. A few hours is even better. In the early days, kids might take a little time to warm up and figure out what they want to do. (Remember: You aren’t providing activities or direction!) Pretty soon they’ll get really engaged and won’t want to stop!

**How many kids?** The more the merrier, though it’s probably best to start small. You can always add more families or spin off more Clubs as you grow.

**How many Play Club supervisors?** Schools and daycares have rules about the ratio of adults to kids, but for a neighborhood Play Club, one or two adults for up to 20 kids is probably enough. And the goal is not to hover! Sit on a stoop and read, or chat! If more parents stick around to socialize, try to keep everyone a good distance from the kids and remember that the parents’ job is not to organize the games or get involved in disputes — check out our FAQ!

## GET SET!

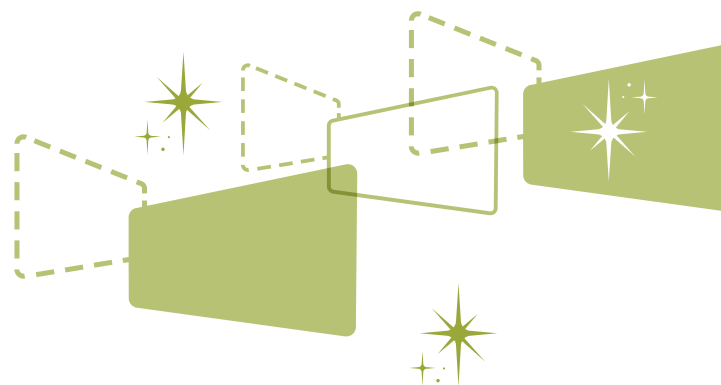
**Invite families to sign up.** Decide if you need something formal. If you're a small group that already knows each other and has each other's contact information, you might not need anything more than an invitation and RSVP by text, phone, email, or Google calendar. If kids will come without their parents, which we encourage, then a list of Play Club families and some emergency contact info should be shared. Send it by email or share it online and save it on your cell phone.

**Set the schedule.** Whether you have rotating hosts or are meeting at a local park, figure out the rotation for hosts and distribute the schedule. For public locations where other people will be around, the kids need to know who the adults in charge are, and the adults need to recognize which kids they need to keep an eye on.

**Agree on guidelines.** Play Club should be loose and unstructured, and any adults should disappear into the background, staying on the sidelines. Take the time to chat with other parents, read a book, or scroll through your favorite blog. (We have one to suggest!) You are there "just in case," like a lifeguard at the pool. Resist the urge to direct, help, or intervene. Comments like "Be careful!" or "That's too high!" can stifle a child's natural desire to push themselves and learn to assess risk.

## GO PLAY!

**The kids know what to do.** If they don't, resist the urge to give suggestions. You can request our Backyard Games cards to brush up on how some classic games are played. Or make sure the kids have some "loose parts." But giving them ideas reinforces their expectation of adult direction. Even if they stand around for a while, boredom will kick in and that's when they'll start getting creative.



# Play Club FAQ's

## **What should I say when a child tattles?**

You may have to bite your tongue and fight your instinct to jump in, especially if your own child is involved. The key is to acknowledge that you have listened while being clear that you will not get involved. A really handy response is, "Thank you for telling me that. How are you going to handle it?" This can be repeated until the child realizes you will not be stepping in. Then stand back and watch them rejoin the play or choose another activity. If every adult provides a similar response to every child, you'll likely see a pretty dramatic reduction in tattling.

## **Do we need parents to sign something?**

If your Play Club consists of families who are already friends and used to spending time together, you may not need anything. Some groups have parents and kids take a pledge, like the one on the next page. Feel free to make changes to ours or create your own.

**What about bullies?** There has never been a group in which every person felt on top of the world every moment, so we can't expect nirvana on the playground either. And yet, Play Club is usually pretty free from drama. This is because the adults step back and allow the kids to resolve their differences. Veteran school psychologist Izzy Kalman notes, "When we step in and take the side of the victims against bullies, we are rewarding kids for thinking and acting like victims. They discover that the more upset they become, the harder we fight for them, so it really pays to get upset." Stepping back is refusing to pour fuel on the fire.

**What about exclusion?** Ironically, by imposing rules like, "No one can be excluded," we sometimes force kids to spend time with those they don't like or who may even bully them. Allowing children to do what they want with whom they want gives them time and space to relax, make friends, and learn true socialization. Being excluded can also help a child recognize when their behavior is hurting their chances of fun. Then they can decide to adjust in order to rejoin the play or choose a different activity — pretty important lessons for getting along and learning to read people.

## **What if one of our kids has a conflict with a non-Club kid?**

What an amazing learning opportunity. Do your best to stand back and let them deal with it. If the other child has a parent nearby, you might casually stroll over, introduce yourself, and say something like, "How about we see if they can figure this out on their own?" Certainly step in if there is any physical violence, but children need to experience some conflict to learn important social skills and practice the art of negotiation without adults playing judge.

**What about injuries?** It might seem counterintuitive, but there are fewer injuries when children are allowed to play freely and are aware that they are in charge of making their own risk assessments. Additionally, small "owies" help a child understand their own limits and develop resilience. Have some basic first-aid supplies available and use your own common sense if a child has more than a bruise or scrape.

*Our* **LET** **GROW**  
*Play Club*

## **Kid Pledge**

I will play respectfully. I will not deliberately hit or physically hurt another child.

I understand I need to get permission to leave the area.

I agree to listen to the adults. They'll only get involved when they need to, and then it's my job to listen.

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## **Parent Pledge**

I understand that not all kids will be happy all the time at Play Club.

I agree that the adults will not intervene in the children's disagreements.

If my child deliberately hurts someone, they need to take a break.

I understand that this is a chance for my child to become more resilient, resourceful, and mature.