

Non-Directive Ecoplay Dos and Don'ts - RATIONALE

While the first four sessions of Ecoplay are directive, with specific activities for parent and child to do together, the next four sessions are non-directive sessions in which the child leads the play.

By allowing the child to lead, the parent allows the child freedom of choice and exploration that helps the child to develop self-confidence and self-esteem in a natural environment. By having the opportunity to practice choice-making, and by linking that choice-making to specific consequences, parents give their children the confidence necessary to consistently make good choices in the future.

Here are some dos and don'ts for your students to keep in mind when they are engaging in non-directive Ecoplay with their children. As they engage in non-directive Ecoplay sessions, they may find it helpful to check off the items as a way of self-monitoring their growing Ecoplay skills. A word of caution; they should not check things off the list during Ecoplay sessions. They should wait until afterwards. During their Ecoplay sessions all of their attention should be directed towards their child.

NOTE: This list for facilitators is an expansion of the list contained in the Ecoplay workbook. The facilitator list includes a rationale for each of the dos and don'ts on the list so that when you are facilitating groups you may explain why parents should focus on these items.

Do...

Do allow the child to lead the play

RATIONALE: Non-directive Ecoplay allows children the freedom to explore and make their own choices within a natural environment. The child decides what to play, how to play, and where (within reason) to play. The parent sets limits as needed while allowing the child freedom of choice.

Do encourage mindful skills

RATIONALE: Mindful skills focus on paying attention in the present moment, free of concerns about the past or the future. It is a shift from doing to being. Mindful skills allow your child, and you, to create some space for your feelings. It's not about letting go of thoughts and feelings. It's about recognizing that thoughts and feelings are not facts. Thoughts and feelings are just processes of the brain. You can choose, in the present, whether or not to pay attention to them.

Do praise the child's efforts

RATIONALE: Praising the efforts of a child who is doing his best is more important than praising the child. One of the basic assumptions of Ecoplay is that children, and parents, are doing the best that they can. Note also that praising the effort is different than praising the child. We're all tempted from time to time to say, "You're such a good child." The problem with praising the child instead of the effort is that the message the child hears might be, "I only value you when you are being good."

Do be patient and mindful

RATIONALE: It's hard to extend patience to your child if you are not patient yourself. Let your actions model behavior more than your words. By setting a patient and mindful example for your child, you teach your child to be patient and mindful. Children do what we do, and not what we say we're going to do.

Do offer unconditional love and approval even when your child makes negative choices

RATIONALE: From the perspective of Ecoplay, parental love is unconditional. You don't only love your children when they make positive choices. You also love them when they make negative choices. The authoritative parenting style embodied in Ecoplay focuses on solutions, not problems. Ecoplay modifies behavior by giving children the opportunity to improve their choices. Parents offer unconditional love and approval throughout this process. While as parents we may not approve of all of our children's actions, we can approve of their efforts to change and praise the effort.

Do reinforce positive behaviors through rewards

RATIONALE: One of the fundamental assumptions of Ecoplay is "rewards are better than punishments." This doesn't mean that the rewards have to be material. If you start off with a baseline of food, clothing, shelter, and unconditional love, then anything above and beyond these things could be considered rewards from the perspective of Ecoplay. Rewards could also be earned privileges like television time, video game time, desserts, or other privileges acceptable to both parent and child. Ecoplay's authoritative approach favors rewards over punishments using the 80/20 Rule of 80% reward, 20% punishment. This is because nearly a century's worth of evidence-based studies continues to demonstrate that rewards work better than punishments when it comes to behavior modification. Rewards encourage specific behaviors while punishments teach children not to get caught.

Do match your voice and affect to your child's voice and affect (exception: no yelling, even if child yells)

RATIONALE: When you match your child's voice and affect, you provide a mirror for your child's emotional states, making your child more aware of her own emotions. If, however, your child yells (in anger or frustration), this is a good sign that the limbic system has been engaged. In that case, speaking in a soft, calm voice can help your child self-soothe.

Do solicit your child's input on how to solve problems

RATIONALE: If you solve your child's problems for them, you've taught them two things: 1. that they can't solve their own problems; and, 2. that you'll solve their problems for them, creating a state of dependence. So for example, if your child has a bottle of bubble liquid and is struggling to

get the top off of it, it may be tempting to open it for them. But if you do so, you rob them of the joy of discovering that they can do it themselves. On the other hand, if they ask you for help, it's okay to help them. Just give them the opportunity to do it themselves first and don't offer help until it is requested.

Do teach your children to make themselves happy

RATIONALE: One of the skills of Ecoplay is teaching children to self-regulate. This means teaching them to be responsible for their own emotional wellbeing so that they aren't tempted to solicit others to regulate their emotions for them. This includes teaching your children how to make themselves happy.

Do validate your child's feelings, whatever they are (remember, the feeling itself is okay; it's the behavior that comes after the feeling that may be less than helpful)

RATIONALE: There's no such thing as a "wrong" feeling. If you send your children a message that some of their feelings are "wrong," then they feel invalidated. Lack of validation regarding emotional states leads to emotional aggression. Emotional aggression is the act of attempting to make others responsible for your own emotional states. When children feel that their emotions aren't being validated, they tend to lash out in emotionally aggressive ways.

Do what you say you're going to do

RATIONALE: If you don't live up to your promises, you've taught your child that you are unreliable. If you can't be reliable, you have no right to expect your child to be reliable.

Do walk slowly and deliberately enough for your child to keep up

RATIONALE: If you have to walk to get to your child's sacred space, the two of you could use this time to engage in a little mindful walking. Mindful walking is taking the mindful breathing exercise from Session 1 to the next level. Pay attention to the sensations of walking; how your legs move, how your feet make contact with the ground, and how the rest of your body movements support the act of walking. You may also direct your attention to your senses as you walk. What do you see here? What do you smell? What do you hear? This period of mindful meditation before engaging in the day's Ecoplay activity serves to ground and center both you and your child, making it easier to focus on the activities.

Do answer questions about flora and fauna, but only if you know what you're talking about

RATIONALE: This helps your child to indulge in her natural curiosity about her sacred space. It also encourages connections to nature. The more natural connections you can teach your child to make, the more of nature's healing power she will be able to access.

Don't...

Don't ask questions, offer information, or make suggestions

RATIONALE: If you answer questions, offer information, or make suggestions, then the Ecoplay session becomes about your thoughts, knowledge and motivations rather than the child's. If your child asks you a question, you can simply respond by saying, "That's up to you." For example, suppose the child holds up a toy dinosaur and asks you, "What is this called?" You might be tempted to say, "It's a dinosaur." But to your child, it might not be a dinosaur. It might be a space ship, or another child who bullied them in school that day, or even an imaginary friend. If you label it "dinosaur," then it becomes what you think it is instead of what your child thinks it is. So instead, try saying something like, "It can be whatever you want it to be." This is one of the harder skills of Ecoplay, and takes practice. We're naturally inclined to answer questions when our children ask. But with patience, it's a skill that can be learned.

NOTE: The one exception here is if your child asks questions about the flora and fauna of the sacred space. In such a case, you're integrating the child's curiosity into the natural space, and creating bonds between your child, yourself, and nature.

Don't make judgments on whether the play is good or bad, right or wrong

RATIONALE: Non-directive play sessions are about allowing the child to choose the activities and how to perform them. It is a child-centered approach that honors the child's choices. Labeling certain activities as good or bad, right or wrong, makes the play about what the parent wants, and not what the child wants. Note that this is separate from limit-setting. Parents are still free to set appropriate limits when necessary. If using the HUG limit-setting tool, it is possible to set limits without labeling a behavior as good or bad, right or wrong, because HUG limit-setting just says, "I Hear you, I Understand your thought and feelings; now I'm going to Give you some choices that are acceptable to both of us."

Don't reprimand or scold (HUG limit-setting places no evaluations on behaviors; it simply sets limits)

RATIONALE: Reprimanding or scolding invalidates the child's feelings, thoughts, and wishes. Using HUG limit-setting modifies the child's behavior without having to resort to blaming, shaming, guilt-tripping, reprimanding, or scolding.

Don't praise the child

RATIONALE: We're all tempted from time to time to say, "You're such a good child." The problem with praising the child instead of the effort the child is making is that the message the child hears might be, "I only value you when you are being good." Praising the effort instead lets the child know that the effort is appreciated, and that the child is always valued.

Don't hover over the child (no helicopter parenting)

RATIONALE: The more you hover over the child, the more the child feels that they are about to make a mistake at any moment, and that you are waiting to bail them out. Having obstacles to overcome is what helps children to build resilience, to develop coping skills, to grow their choice-making skills, and to deal with situations that are difficult. Children need to learn through trial and error. Parents often have difficulty with this because it's hard to see your child make mistakes and learn from them. But with no adversity, your child builds no choice-making skills.

Don't show affection, love or approval only for positive choices

RATIONALE: Love and encourage your children even when they make negative choices.

Don't withhold affection, love or approval for negative choices

RATIONALE: This doesn't mean you have to love the choices that led to the negative consequences. It means that you learn to validate the thinking process that led to the poor choice, and use a solution-focused approach to help your child make better choices next time.

Don't punish or threaten to punish

RATIONALE: Rewards work better than punishments in modeling behavior. Rewards enforce a specific behavior, while punishments only teach children what not to do, without giving them a positive, solution-focused choice instead.

Don't yell! If limit-setting is needed, use HUG (non-judgmental, non-punitive limit-setting)

RATIONALE: You can't teach your child to self-regulate if you can't regulate yourself.

Don't solve your child's problems for them by telling them what to do and how to do it

RATIONALE: Solving your child's problems creates a state of dependency and robs your child of the opportunity to develop problem-solving skills on their own.

Don't deny your child's feelings, even negative ones; instead encourage them to express even negative feelings in positive, solution-focused ways

RATIONALE: There's no such thing as a "wrong" feeling. What may be less helpful is the behavior that comes after the feeling. The feeling itself is not the problem. Teach your child to find positive solutions to negative feelings.

Don't try to micromanage your child's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings

RATIONALE: When you do this, you rob your child of opportunities for self-discovery.

Don't make promises you can't keep; when you do you teach your child that you are unreliable

RATIONALE: If your child can't rely on you, why should you be able to rely on your child?

Don't do what you say you're not going to do

RATIONALE: If you expect your child to be able to self-regulate, you have to be able to set good examples of self-regulation for them. Don't make promises you can't keep. When you do, you teach them that it's okay to break promises.

Don't set the pace when walking outdoors; instead allow your child to lead

When you allow your child to set the pace, you set the stage early on for non-directive Ecoplay sessions by sending the message that your child is in control from the outset.

Don't answer questions about what the child should be doing or how the child should be playing; instead, remind them, "That's up to you"

RATIONALE: This makes the Ecoplay sessions child-centered, focusing on the child's wants and needs instead of the parent's wants and needs.

Don't think that paying attention to your child will "spoil" them; research shows that just the opposite is true

RATIONALE: Everyone needs and wants attention. It is as necessary as food, clothing and shelter to the wellbeing of your child. Giving them attention nurtures them; it does not "spoil" them.

Non-Directive Ecoplay Dos and Don'ts from concepts expressed in:

VanFleet, Risë, Sywulak, Andrea E. and Caparosa-Sniscak, Cynthia (2010). *Child-Centered Play Therapy*, Guilford Press, New York, NY.