**Structuring play routines for children**

With structure and routine come security, familiarity and reduced anxiety. Structure also provides less opportunity for boredom or under stimulation, which can lead to challenging behaviour. Children are often unable to entertain themselves and rely on direction and guidance from an adult.

Children are usually unable to spend long on any one activity, so having a ‘bank’ of things to do and being prepared with resources and ideas will make life easier. Start putting potential craft resources aside (toilet rolls, newspapers, egg cartons, cereal boxes) so they are available when needed. Log on to pages such as Pinterest once a week for ideas and inspiration. Pick up puzzle books, colouring books or small games from shops like The Works / B&M / Supermarket when you see any that would appeal to your children – introduce them one at a time and save some for ‘a rainy day’. Use events such as Birthdays and Christmas to ask relatives for sensory equipment as presents for your children; trampets, paddling pools, sand trays, bean bags, pop up tents, fluffy blankets, swings, bath toys.

The following areas of activity provide a rounded ‘play’ experience for children and could be used to structure their free time;

1. Physical – trampoline / walk / park / swimming / soft play / ball pool
2. Craft – playdough / drawing / painting / baking / making
3. Independence – time on their own (but closely supervised) to choose their own leisure activity. This would be from a range of suitable toys you have already put out to ‘choose’ from.
4. TV – schedule a couple of programmes your children enjoy. Use this time for them when you need to be free to be doing jobs / chores.
5. ICT – ensuring the device has suitable child safe settings (so they cannot access anything inappropriate) make time for them to use apps and games they enjoy. Introduce a timer or a Now & Next timetable to prepare them for the end of this activity.
6. Sensory – water play / slime / sand / sensory toys / bubbles / ice / shaving foam. Prepare the area they can play in (to avoid excess mess in the surrounding area) and have an apron ready for them to wear.
7. Interactive – small world figures / dress up / cards / age appropriate board games / stacking / sorting / turn taking . Spend as much time as you can by sharing in these activities with you children so you can model positive behaviour, language, negotiations and self control. Take these opportunities to praise your children with specific language wherever possible (I really like the way you shared that toy then / You used that toy really creatively then / That was a good idea / thank you for waiting so patiently for this / you used lovely manners asking for that pencil.)

Try to incorporate a range of activities to structure your children’s free time, so they can experience as much ‘play’ opportunities as possible. This benefits their development, health and wellbeing and use of social skills.