



Play is one of the main ways in which children learn and develop. It helps to build self-worth by giving a child a sense of his or her own abilities and to feel good about themselves. Because it's fun, children often become very absorbed in what they are doing.



Key Points:

Learning through play is important and can help young children be ready for school, encourage their imagination and help them with literacy and numeracy skills.

Role play games can help your child make sense of the world, aid in their emotional and physical development.

Outdoor play and nature are beneficial to your child as they learn about the world around them and helps their sensory needs too.

Keeping it fun

It's important that learning is fun at this age. It needs to be about doing things with them that they like. They might find unusual ways of doing things - for a toddler, building blocks aren't just for making towers, and paint can be used without a brush! Show them how things work, but if they want to experiment, let them.

Children learn through all their senses through taste, touch, vision, hearing and smelling. They will watch those around them and copy language and behaviour.



Don't push your child too hard. Children develop in their own ways and in their own time. Try not to compare them to other children. You can also encourage reading, by reading to and

with them. Look at the pictures together; this will help younger children make sense of the words. It's also good to talk to them a lot, about everyday things while you are cooking or cleaning. This will give you a chance to teach them how things work and they will be able to ask you questions.

Get ready for lots of “whys?” 😊

Setting the scene



Anyone who spends any amount of time with young children understands that providing them with opportunities for play provides so much more than a few minutes or hours of ‘fun’. Play also allows children to relax, let off steam, develop social skills such as concentration and co-operation, encourages the development of the imagination, develops motor skills and teaches self-expression.



Sarah Owen, founder of 'Pyjama Drama' – drama, music, movement and play for pre-school children says, 'Many children seem to be born with a natural ability to play, but some children find it more difficult and need to 'learn' how to play well and this is where parents can make a big difference. Whilst it is very important that children play with their peers and are given opportunities for unstructured play, children who also play with a loved adult can benefit greatly – the benefits of having fun together cannot be underestimated!'

Adults have a role within the play by making time and space available with the relevant resources. Think about creating play ideas that help support and extend learning and development.



INCREDIBLE Benefits of DRAMATIC Play

Dramatic play aka role play

Dramatic play is essential to a child's social (or emotional) development and can play a large part in their physical development too. Children make sense of the world in which they live by acting out situations before they happen and by copying what they see around them. Pretend (or dramatic) play contributes to a child's emotional development as they learn to see life from a different viewpoint and allows them to 'trial' situations before they happen.

Most children are naturally imaginative and will happily talk away to someone on their toy phone or drive the sofa to the shops, and this creativity should be actively encouraged!

This type of play also develops children's imaginations which are closely linked to intellectual development.

Outdoor play and exploration

Encouraging your young child to explore outdoor play is extremely beneficial and necessary for their development.

Outdoor play helps them to learn lots about the ever-changing environment and gives them the opportunity to use their whole body and develop their gross motor skills. It can meet their multi-sensory needs and can give them a love for the outdoors.

Whether it is messy play, creative or role play, it is an essential part of learning.



Don't miss the importance of this stage

Don't dismiss the importance of this stage, which builds on the previous ones. It's a healthy form of learning through play and part of your child's play journey. It could be that the child feels tentative, needs to learn the rules, and/or maybe is the youngest and wants just to take a step back for a while to watch before joining in play with others. Watching helps them gain confidence and learn the framework for future stages of play.

Children love to play because it's fun—but it's also vital to a child's healthy development. In fact, during play, children learn and practice key social, cognitive, organizational, physical, and emotional skills, including creativity, imagination, and problem-solving. 1 The benefits of play are progressive in nature, meaning that the skills kids develop during their fun and games build upon each other.

Seemingly simple activities like rolling a ball back and forth with a sibling or putting on a costume hone skill like learning to take turns, fine motor skills, proprioception (awareness of the body in space), and getting along with others. Influential sociologist Mildred Parten was an early advocate for the benefits of play. Her work described six essential types of play that kids take part in, depending on their age, mood, and social setting, and explained the ways that children learn and interact with each other during play.

Descriptions and typical ages that each stage of play emerge are included below. However, every child develops at their own pace and may engage in these types of play earlier or later. Plus, while these stages are progressive, they often occur simultaneously and stick around while new stages come about.

11 types of play that every parent should know



Unoccupied Play

Unoccupied play primarily occurs in infants, from birth to three months. This is the first stage of play, and to the untrained eye, likely doesn't look like play at all. However, infant activity of observing their surroundings and/or displaying random movements with seemingly no objective is actually unoccupied play. Despite appearances, this definitely is play and sets the stage for future play exploration.

Parents don't need to do anything special to foster this play, babies do it instinctively. However, it's important to allow babies to have time to explore unimpeded, even if it's just wiggling their hands and feet in the air.



Solitary (Independent) Play

Solitary play is just what it sounds like—your child playing alone. This type of play is important because it teaches a child how to keep them self-entertained, eventually setting the path to being self-sufficient. Toys for independent play can be anything that babies, toddlers, or preschoolers play can play with on their own, such as stuffed animals, blocks, toy figures, dress-up costumes, noisemakers, play "tools," dolls, push toys, and books.

Any child can play independently, but this type of play typically begins to emerge by age two. It is most common in children between two and three. At that age, children are still pretty self-focused and lack good communication and sharing skills. If a child is on the shy side and doesn't know their playmates well, they may prefer this type of play at older ages as well.

Preschoolers on up may continue to choose independent play even after learning to play well with others as it provides unique opportunities to explore their own interests and agenda on their own terms.

Toys to Encourage Independent Play

Onlooker Play



Onlooker play is when a child simply observes other children playing and doesn't partake in the action. Your child may watch what you or other adults are doing as well. Onlooker play is typical for children between two and three years old and is especially common for younger children who are working on their developing vocabulary.

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Build Your Child's Vocabulary

During onlooker play, by observing and possibly mimicking the play of others, your child is building their own skills.

They may be looking up from using their own toys while engaging in onlooker play, but this type of play is about observing rather than playing alongside others, which is called parallel play (see more below). However, children in onlooker play may comment on the observed activities. They are learning about how other kids play and interact and preparing themselves for their eventual participation in such group play.

Parallel Play

Put two 3-year-olds in a room together and this is what you are likely to see: the two children having fun, playing side by side in their own little worlds. It doesn't mean that they don't like one another, they are just engaging in parallel play. This type of play begins around age two and differs from playing together in that neither child tries to influence the play of the other.



Educational Games for Kids

Despite having little overt social contact between playmates, children in parallel play learn quite a bit from one another like awareness of different types of play. Even though it appears that they aren't paying attention to each other, they truly are and often mimic the other one's behavior. Like each of the other stages, this type of play is viewed as an important, progressive bridge to the later stages of play. Many types of activities, from drawing to playing with toy cars, can occur during parallel play.



Associative Play

Slightly different from parallel play, associative play, which commonly begins between ages three or four, also features children playing separately from one another. But in this mode of play, they are involved with what the other is doing—think children building a city with blocks.

As they build their individual buildings, they are talking to one another and engaging each other but primarily working on their own. Typically, this form of play phases out by age five.

This is an important stage of play because it helps little ones develop a whole host of skills, such as socialization (what should we build now?), taking turns (can I have the shovel?), problem-solving (how can we make this city bigger?), cooperation (if we work together we can make our city even better), and language development (learning what to say to get their messages across to one another). Associative play is how many children begin to make real friendships.



Cooperative Play

Cooperative play is where all the stages come together and children truly start playing together. Typically occurring between four and five years of age, this is the predominant type of play seen in groups of older preschoolers on up or in younger preschoolers who have older siblings or have been around a lot of children. However, the earlier stages of play will still be used to varying degrees by these children at other times as well.

This stage of play can encompass many different types of play (described in more detail below). Whether they are building a puzzle together, playing a board game, or enjoying an

outdoor group activity, cooperative play sets the stage for future interactions as your child matures into an adult.

Other Types of Play

While the above stages are important and vital to your child's social development, there are other key types of play that also contribute to a child's development. These kinds of play usually show up once a child begins to engage in cooperative play and include the following:



Competitive Play: When your child is playing Chutes and Ladders or on a sports team, they are engaging in competitive play. Rules, turn-taking, functioning as part of a team, and the realities of winning and losing are the big lessons taken from this type of play. Emotional regulation, learning to be a good sport, and coping with defeat are learned from competitive play as well.



Constructive Play: Constructive play teaches kids about manipulation, building, and fitting things together. Examples include building with blocks, Legos, or magnetic tiles, making a road for toy cars, or constructing a fort out of couch pillows. Cognitive skills are used to figure out how to make something work best, whether it is a block tower that won't stand up or a sandcastle that keeps collapsing. This play also teaches the power of trying again.



Dramatic/Fantasy Play: When your child plays dress-up, doctor, spy, or restaurant, it's dramatic or fantasy play. Through this type of play, not only does your child's imagination get a workout, but they learn how to take turns, cooperate, share, and work on language development. Through role-play, kids are also able to learn about functioning in the greater community.



Physical Play: Gross and fine motor skills really come into play with physical play, whether your child is throwing a ball, climbing a play structure, or riding a bike. Physical play encourages kids to develop fitness skills and to enjoy physical activity.



Symbolic Play: This type of play can include vocal activities (singing, jokes, or rhymes), graphic arts (drawing, coloring, or working with clay), counting, or making music. Symbolic play helps children learn to express themselves and explore and process their experiences, ideas, and emotions.

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