
SUPPORTING PLAY SKILLS IN YOUNG CHILDREN



Play is a spontaneous and creative process that is essential for every child. Through play, children learn how to make sense of their world and build essential skills such as fine/gross motor, speech and language, and social skills. Play also helps support healthy emotional development and self confidence in children. Play is such an important process for children that Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that ‘Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child’.

As children grow, the way they play and interact also changes. Research has found that children display several stages of play, these are:

PARTEN’S SIX STAGES OF PLAY

- Unoccupied play – When a child is not playing, just observing.
- Solitary (independent play) – When the child plays alone and is focused on his/her activity. Child is uninterested or unaware of what others are doing.
- Onlooker play – When a child watches other children play but does not engage. The child may engage in conversation about the play, but does not join in.
- Parallel play – When a child plays separately from others but close to them and mimic their actions.
- Associative play – When a child is interested in the people playing but not the activity they are doing, or when there is no organized activity.
- Cooperative play – When a child is interested in the people and the activity. The activity is organized, with assigned roles for participants.

Generally, younger children display more nonsocial types of play (unoccupied, solitary, onlooker and parallel play) and older children display more social play (associate and cooperative play).

Parents play a major role in supporting their child's play. Some of the ways which you can help support your child's play include:

- **Watching, observing, and following your child's lead:** You can develop your child's play by noticing what your child enjoys playing with, and following their lead. For example, if you notice that your child enjoys playing with a specific toy, you can join in with them, or help them if they are struggling to play with the toy. When following your child's lead, resist the temptation to criticize, direct, to turn your child's play into a lesson.
- **Providing your child with opportunities for play:** You can create a play space for your child, with various activities and toys for them to explore. You can also arrange for play dates with other children, to develop your child's social skills. Of course, your child may require adult facilitation at times during these play activities or play dates.
- **Offering guidance when needed:** Play provides opportunities for children to find creative ways to problem solve. However, at times, your child may require your help if they get stuck on a toy. Problem solving may also be interpersonal in nature, for example, sharing a toy with a peer and taking turns. Most children need help to negotiate such social situations, and it is helpful to be aware and available to support your child when needed.

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