

PLAY



All children get involved in playful activities. These are often the things they choose to do themselves. They follow their own ideas and do it for their own reasons. But often they do it simply because it's fun or because they're exploring something.

Children of all ages play, including babies. Babies play at making different sounds and touching things that interest them.

Young children play in lots of different ways. They can play with anything around them, such as using a yoghurt pot as a drum. They often use their imagination to pretend.

What types of play are there?

Different types of play are common at different ages. However, the play is not restricted to a specific age. For example, exploratory play is common in children under one-year-old but a child might keep doing exploratory play up to the age of 5 years or even older. Here are some different types of play.

Exploratory play (birth to 5 years): This is when children explore objects and people. Young children will put things in their mouth, shake things, pull and push things, and so on. Older children will keep repeating the same actions for fun. They will do things such as run, climb, fill and empty boxes.

Solitary play (1 – 1 ½ years): This is when a child plays alone. The child uses toys that are different from any other children nearby. There is usually no conversation with other people. Sometimes the child just watches what other children are doing but doesn't join in. Solitary play is very common in children up to 18 months of age. But it's important for children of any age to have time by themselves to play.

Parallel play (1 ½ – 2 years): This is when a child plays alongside other children. The child might use similar toys and do similar things to the children nearby. But the child doesn't try to play with the other children.

Pretend play (1 – 3 years): This is when the child pretends to do things. Younger children might pretend to eat or sleep. As they get older they might pretend to feed a teddy bear or wash a doll. The older child then pretends without an object – they use imaginary objects. While pretend play develops from 1 to 3 years, it continues throughout a child's life.

Group play (3 ½ – 6 years): This is when a child plays with other children in a group. Often a leader is chosen. Older children often play different roles – such as pretending to be a teacher or a nurse.

Constructive play (3 ½ – 6 years): This is when a child uses things to make something or solve a problem. They might use paint, sand or wooden blocks to make something. It is very common in older children.

Games with rules (5 years and older): This is when a child understands that some games (such as marbles, football, and draughts) have rules. The child understands that they have to accept and agree with them in order to play the game properly.

Why is play important for developing speech and language?

- Play helps a child to develop their concentration. They will be focusing on objects and people. When playing with an adult, the child will be listening and learning. For example, the young child will be learning the names of objects, so that when they start to talk they will know the names.
- Adults often make all sorts of sounds while playing with a child. The child will then imitate these. Not all the sounds produced will be ones used in the child's language. But it is good to experiment with many different sounds. For example, an adult may make popping noises and tongue clicks that go together with tickling or finger walking.
- Adults often use an exaggerated sing-song voice when playing with a child. This is very helpful. The child needs to hear and develop a voice that can rise and fall easily.
- Play encourages talking between an adult and the child, and also between the child and other children.
- Play helps children learn to take turns. Taking turns is important for conversation. In conversation one person speaks while the other person listens. Then they swap over as the speaker becomes the listener, and the listener becomes the speaker.

How to encourage play

- Provide interesting materials to play with. These don't have to be expensive toys. For example, a 2-year-old child will enjoy banging a wooden spoon in a plastic yoghurt pot.
- Give the child a variety of materials. If you are giving toys, make sure they're right for the child's age. Usually the label on the toy box tells you the age range for the toy.
- Don't have too few objects or toys to play with because the child won't be stimulated. But don't have too many because the child might become distracted and not be able to concentrate.
- Give enough time for play. Don't hurry the child. Let them finish whatever activity they're doing. If you stop them playing too soon they might become frustrated.
- Don't leave the child too long playing on their own. If you do, they might get bored or feel lonely. If this happens too often they might feel neglected.
- Let the child take the lead in playing. Follow their lead and support what they do by encouraging them with, "Well done!", "That's good!" and so on. Help the child feel good about what they're doing.
- To help the child concentrate while playing, keep background noises to a minimum. Turn off radios and noisy televisions.
- Give older children lots of different experiences, such as painting, listening to music and songs, storytelling and puzzles. Encourage them to explore.