

Typical development of object and social play

Play reflects a child's understanding of both the physical world and their social world. Play typically follows a development progression:

- Simple to complex
- Self to other
- Concrete to abstract

Types of Play w/objects/toys

- Sensory-motor play
- Exploratory play
- Representational play
- Replica (theme) play
- Coordinated symbolic play

Type of Social Play

- Solitary play
- Parallel play
- On-looker play
- Associative play (common focus)
- Cooperative play (common goal play)

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Strategies to support play with toys and objects

Play reflects a child's understanding of both the physical world and their social world. Two of the most important types of play to encourage in young children are *replica play* and coordinated symbolic play.

Replica (Theme) Play occurs when children recreate familiar situations with toys; for example, loading a toy school bus with dolls, driving it to school and having the "children" get off. This type of play helps children develop a sense of sequence and narrative important for language development and future literacy. Below are strategies to increase replica (theme) play: Provide high realism toys/objects and make visible.

The more realistic the toys/objects and the more familiar the real life experiences, the more easily the child should be able to replicate them into play themes. House play, shopping, riding the bus to school, setting up for snack at school, are all themes that can be easily replicated with simple, realistic props, such as dishes, pan, plastic food, used food boxes.

These theme "props" should be placed so they are visible, since many children at this play stage are not yet able to plan out the play theme, but rather, it unfolds based upon what is in the immediate environment. Thus, the toys available to support play themes should be organized and visibly displayed so that they can be easily incorporated into the play.

"Structured toys" are toys that provide a pre-designed theme such as the Fisher-Price Garage or toys that can be used in easily understood ways, such as the Brio Railroad Set. For example, it is more difficult to "imagine" and build a track and station out of basic blocks than to hook the Brio train tracks together and add the train and station.

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Assist in maintaining focus on the play - "talking **in** the air". Adults can support play by providing comments that assists in maintaining focus on the play. Such commenting is sometimes called "talking in the air," in that the comments are made aloud, but without the expectation of a response from the child. For example, "The plane is flying all around." "Is that plane ever going to land?" The goal of this intervention is to assist in maintaining focus and expanding his play, rather than specifically directing his play.

Coordinated Symbolic Play occurs when the child uses something to 'pretend' something else, e.g., *uses an object or action to represent something else*. For example, pretending a pencil is a toothbrush or cupping hands and pretending to drink water. While symbolic play skills cannot be direct taught, the child who is almost ready to engage in this type play is likely to benefit from opportunities to play with this manner of thinking.

Model this "*manner of thinking*". Adults (or peers with these skills) can model 'pretending' by miming an activity just done with a real object. For example, taking a drink from an imaginary cup just after pouring a juice into a real cup, or using on object to represent another by pretending a one-inch cube is ajar of mustard and putting in on a plastic hamburger.

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Strategies to support social play skills

Many children benefit from adults to increase their social play skills. Two types of social play are *parallel play* and *associative play*.

Parallel Play is defined as: *playing beside, but not with another in a similar activity or with similar materials; includes some imitation.*

Associative Play is defined as: *playing with another in a loosely structured, common focus activity.*

The following are specific strategies to increase these social play skills:
Provide opportunities for proximity.

For parallel play to occur children must be in proximity to one another and have access to similar type toys. Using furniture to create spaces that encourages proximity is a helpful intervention. Another is to identify toys and activities that support proximity such as water and sand tables. These types of toys/activities allow proximity and a common focus that encourages parallel play, imitation and taking-turns with objects.

Have enough toys. Having enough toys for all, and having enough of the same type toys, encourages parallel play.

Use adult as models, mediators and common focus creators. Adults should be available to both model and mediate simple reciprocal turn-taking during peer play. In addition, the strategy described as "talking in the air" can be utilized to create the common focus necessary for associative play.

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"Talking in the air". Adults can support associative play by providing comments that assists in maintaining a common focus on the play. Such commenting is sometimes called "talking in the air," in that the comments are made aloud, but without the expectation of a response from the children. For example, "*Both Billy and Andrew are flying planes. " Andrew's putting gas in his car. "The goal of this intervention is to assist in maintaining a common focus on the play, so that the children stay in a shared activity, rather than a *parallel* activity.*

Stages of relating to others

Based upon the work of child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan, M.D. more educators are becoming interested in learning about the developmental process, *or stages*. Children go through as they learn to relate to others. Stanley Greenspan identifies four developmental stages:

1) Engagement

During this stage a child will follow you with her eyes, is eager for touch, shows emotion, responds to facial expression and engages, disengages and re-engages.

2) Two-Way Communication

During this stage a child responses to gestures and gestures in return, initiates interactions, points to desired objects, has joint reference and expresses a variety of feelings.

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3) Shared Meanings

During this stage a child uses words and play to express feelings; engages in simple theme play that re-enacts care-taking themes and familiar activities.

4) Emotional Thinking

During this stage a child begins to distinguish what's real from what isn't, can follow rules and respond to limits, begins to connect feelings with behaviour, and engages in more complex theme play.

Progression through these stages is dependent upon multiple developmental systems working together, including:

- Cognitive
- Language
- Sensory
- Affect
- Motor

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Developmental Levels of Social Play

Unoccupied Behavior

The child is not playing but occupies herself with watching anything that happens to be of momentary interest. When there is nothing exciting taking place, she plays with her own body, gets on and off chairs, just stands around, follows the teacher, or sits in one spot glancing around the room (playground).

Onlooker Behavior

The child spends most of her time watching the other children play. She often talks to the children being observed, asks questions or give suggestions, but does not overtly enter into the play. This type differs from unoccupied in that the onlooker is definitely observing particular groups of children rather than anything that happens to be exciting. The child stands or sits within speaking distance from other children.

Solitary Play

The child plays alone and independently with toys that are different from those used by the children within speaking distance and makes no effort to get close to other children. He pursues his own activity without reference to what others are doing.

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Parallel Play

The child plays independently, but the activity chosen naturally brings her among other children. She plays with toys that are like those the children around her are using but she plays with the toys as she sees fit, and does not try to influence or modify the activity of the children near her. She plays beside rather than with the other children.

Associative Play

The child plays with other children. The communication concerns the common activity; there is borrowing and loaning of play materials; following one another with trains or wagons; mild attempts to control which children may or may not play in the group. All the members engage in similar activity, there is no division of labor, and no organization of the activity around materials, goal, or product. The children do not subordinate their individual interests to that of the group.

Cooperative Play

The child plays in a group that is organized for the purpose of making some material product, striving to attain some competitive goal, dramatizing situations of adult and group life, or playing formal games.

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ENCOURAGING AND GUIDING CHILDREN'S PLAY

Before you begin it is important to observe the child playing.

Observe:

- How does the child show an interest in play? (How do we know he wants to play?)
- What does he likes to play with? (What are his favourite toys or activities?)
- What is his style of play? (Is he a quiet player, active player or does he play differently than the other children?)
- How does he play with the toy? (Does he play with parts of the toy, does he play with the toy as it is meant to be played with, that is, running a car along the floor or does he use the toy in a novel or imaginative manner for example, driving to the zoo?)
- How does he communicate with others during play? (Does he know how to ask to join play or talk with his playmates during the play?).

Observing the child's play style and play interests will help the adult set up activities and play situations that will be interesting for him. Observing the child at play also helps the adult understand how she can help him learn to play with other children.

Helping a child learn to play with others can be encouraged by using the following techniques of scaffolding play, using social –communication guidance, and play guidance. These techniques are an interrelated system of guidance that are offered simultaneously during a play experience.

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Scaffolding play is a fluid process of guidance from the adult. The adult moves back and forth between the *maximum, intermediate, and minimum strategies* as the day or play experience requires. The techniques in scaffolding are:

Maximum Support uses direction and modeling to help the child become engaged in the play. The adult directs the play and players by:

- Setting out play materials
- Setting out materials that are interesting and encourage children to play with each other.
- Identifying parts or roles for the children in the play
- Partnering players together
- Scripting actions and dialogue for the players
- Inserting ritual and drama into the play

Intermediate support uses verbal and visual cues to help the child learn to play. As the child gets more engaged in the play the adult's role becomes less intensive. Now the adult will "coach" the players using the following techniques:

- Offering suggestions
- Posing leading questions
- Commenting on the play
- Reframing the play event

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Minimum support occurs when the adult stands by, waiting if she is needed. As the child becomes more involved in the play, the adult stands near by, ready to step in and help the playing children using any of the above strategies.

Social – Communication Guidance is often needed when children are learning to play. These skills are necessary when a child:

- wants to initiate play with others
- responds to other children’s invitations to play
- joins or enters play
- stays with the play with other children and expands on this play

The adult uses non-verbal strategies (for example, pointing or pictures) and verbal strategies (for example, telling the child what to say or using personal stories) to teach social cues. These cues can be used to start playing and to maintain the play. The adult tells the children what to do, what to say, and how to show appreciation (for example, manners) to the other children. These strategies are tailored to each player’s ability and can be simple, “Look” or “Come play with me.”

Play Guidance is a series of strategies the adult uses to encourage the child to play with others. These strategies include:

Orientation is usually used with a child who does not spontaneously attend to other children and their play.

- The adult allows the child to stay close to her while pointing out the other children and activities. The adult can hold the child’s hand, stand nearby or sit the child on her lap.

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- The adult encourages the child to watch others by giving the child interesting play materials

Imitation-mirroring fosters interest in other children and play by imitating what the new child is doing.

- The adult encourages interest in the play by having duplicate materials.
- The adult involves the child in mimicking activities, for example, playing the game “Follow the Leader.” The adult reverses the roles at times, and mimics the child.

Parallel play creates situations for the children to play independently beside one and other. This helps the child become used to playing near other children.

- The adult guides children to play beside each other by using interesting toys and activities.
- The adult sets up similar activities in the same space
- The adult sets up activities that allow the children to play with parts of the same toy or activity, for example, painting a large box or playing in the water table.
- Use sensory play, construction toys (blocks or ego), and crafts activities.

Joint focus is used when the child is beginning to take an interest in the other children and their play but he continues to play independently beside them.

- The adult guides the children to look at and play with different parts of the same activity.

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- The adult encourages the children to show each other their materials and to share these.
- Use toys such as doll houses, garages, Marbleworks, tool bench, play structures with many different openings, or a single doll when one child combs the hair while the other child puts on the doll's socks.

Joint action is used when the child is beginning to take an active interest in other children and their activities but is having difficulty participating in the play activities.

- The adult may start by encouraging the children to play in brief reciprocal play involving joint action, for example, a turn taking activity.
- The adult uses the materials to encourage turn taking
- The adult uses turn taking “markers” for the children, for example, the people who are using the computer wear a sign.
- Use “peek–a–boo” and “hide and seek” themes with boxes, blankets.
- Use sensory games where the children take turns, for example, taking turns being rolled in a blanket, making it like a burrito and adding imaginary fixings (rice, beans).
- Use construction toys and trains with track and tunnels to have the players coordinate their play to set it up.

Role enactment is used to teach the child how to carry out conventional actions with realistic props to portray real life activities with other children. This allows the child to participate in their own way with a group of children who are playing in a themed pretend play, (for example playing pet store.)

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- The adult guides the child to act out real life activities within the other children's play for example, stirring a pot when the children are in the dramatic play centre.
- The adult provides realistic props to the children.
- The adult provides play themes that are familiar to the child in every day life.
- The adult provides play themes that fit in with the child's habits or rituals. For example, if the child likes to bang object, the adult can set up a construction theme with play hammers and hard hats.

Role playing is used to encourage imaginary roles and play themes that the children create amongst themselves. It is role enactment on a more advanced level. The child can comprehend and engage in pretend play but needs assistance in integrating and coordinating play with other children.

- The adult encourages the children to take on imaginary roles within play themes they have decided themselves.
- The adult sets out a collection of theme based props to encourage the imaginary play.
- The adult encourages the children to explain play with an evolving script o the new child.
- The adult asks questions, comments on the play and reframes it as needed to help the player. Reframing the play helps the child incorporate his play into the larger play, especially if he has started to play in an isolated manner.

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