

# Importance of Play

All babies and children love to play – and so do many adults. Play is an important way for children to learn. There are many different types of play and children gain different skills according to the way they play.

## How Play Helps Children's Learning

All children, even babies, enjoy playing. Why children play is not completely understood, but it is known that children learn through play. There are many things children can learn through play, especially if adults help by providing interesting toys and equipment. Look at some of the things a four-year-old might learn by playing and sharing Lego with another child:

Playing with Lego helps children learn about :

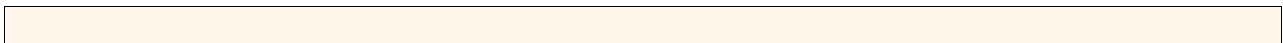
- shape
- space
- how things are put together
- what happens when things fall
- colours
- how to use their hands and eyes
- how to concentrate
- how to play with other children.

As well as helping children to learn, play helps children in each of the areas of development.

## **Children of different ages play in different ways**

The way in which children play changes as they get older and as they develop new skills. Each stage of play is important as it helps children develop.

**Babies:** The way babies and toddlers play is sometimes called mastery play. They repeat movements over and over again as if they were practising. This type of play helps them to control their bodies and movements. They are also finding out about what happens when they touch or move things.



An 11-month-old baby sits at the highchair and drops his spoon on the floor. His carer picks it up. He then drops it again and smiles. Each time it is picked up, he drops it again.

**Toddlers** are mobile and are keen to touch and explore their environment. They also show mastery play and will repeat things over and over again. Toddlers begin to watch the way of other children play, although they will not actually play with them. This is sometimes called spectator or parallel play. Toddlers also copy what they see and bring this into their play.

A two-year-old holds a doll by the arm. He puts it in the pram and covers the doll with a blanket. He pushes the pram along and then takes the doll and drops it on the floor. He then picks up the doll and puts it back in the pram again.

**Pre-school children** often play in a symbolic way. This means they make one thing stand for another. They may pretend a stick is a spoon or a piece of dough is cake. Pre-school children also play with toys and equipment that helps them learn concepts such as heavy and light or their colours. Sometimes pre-school children also play with each other. This is called co-operative play.

Rahima is playing outdoors with Simon. They are mixing grass and leaves together in a bucket.

“We’re making a meal and we’re going to find more food now,” Rahima says.

Rahima and Simon play this game for about twenty minutes before deciding to play on the tricycles.

**School children** keep learning through play. They practise skills they have learnt and put knowledge into their play situations. They may, for example, be shown how to make a plane out of paper and later make one to play with themselves. They can also understand why some games need rules and enjoy making up games with rules.

Rules are important as they show that children are trying to work out why things are as they are.

Anna is playing with some Lego. She is trying to make a house using only yellow bricks. This is her rule for this game. She tells her friend, who is starting to build her own house, that she cannot use any of her yellow bricks because she started using them first. She then

adds, 'You can borrow my yellow bricks, but you must ask before taking them.'  
This shows Anna has learnt a 'rule' that people must ask before borrowing things.

### Play and Social and Emotional Needs

Babies and children need to learn how to share, play and build relationships. They need to learn how to express their feelings and control their behaviour. Play helps babies and children meet these needs.

### **Stages of social play**

Babies and children gradually learn to play with each other. This is important because, by playing with other children, they learn how to build relationships. At first babies tend only to be able to play with an adult, but by the age of three or four, most children can play with each other.

### **How play can help children's emotional development**

By playing children can learn to express their feelings and this helps them to control their behaviour.

#### **Types of social play**

#### **What does this mean?**

#### **Solitary**

Up until about two years children usually play alone. They may play with adults, but cannot play with other children. Older children might choose to play alone — e.g. when painting.

#### **Parallel Play**

From about two years, toddlers start to notice what other children are doing. Parallel play is when children play happily side by side.

#### **Associative Play**

From about the age of three, children may look to see what other children are doing and copy them. This type of play is sometimes called spectator play because the child is watching.

#### **Co-operative Play**

Between three and four years, children begin to develop friendships and are able to play together. As they get older they start to be able to organise their play. They may say things like 'let's be puppies'.

**Babies** enjoy looking at themselves in a mirror. At first they think they are looking at another baby, but gradually they learn that they are looking at themselves. Babies also learn to share toys if adults offer them toys. By playing with an adult, babies learn to smile and look at other people's reactions and faces.

**Toddlers** can feel very frustrated because they often want to do things but they can't quite manage them. They also do not understand why they cannot have things. Play helps toddlers feel more in control and they can gain satisfaction from being able to do things themselves.

Toys such as drums and hammer and pegs are good because toddlers can explore feelings of anger and aggression. Toys such as dolls, prams and teddies can encourage feelings of love and caring.

**Pre-school children** are beginning to use language to explain what they want. They are also beginning to play cooperatively. Dressing up and pretending can help children try out different roles. They may copy actions and words they have seen adults and older children do and use. This type of play is sometimes called role play.

**School children** can play together and often act out some of their fears. For example, they might pretend they are lost or all alone. Play also helps school children get a feeling of what it might be like to be someone else.

### Ways of helping children's social development

#### **Babies and toddlers**

- Understand that babies and toddlers cannot share toys.
- Show babies and toddlers how to share by offering them toys.
- Play *peek-a-boo* and *pat-a-cake* with babies to show them how to join in.
- Teach toddlers rhymes so they can join in and share.
- Play with toddlers so they learn the skills of playing.

#### **Pre-school children**

- Play board games with pre-school children so they learn how to take turns.
- Make sure there are enough toys and equipment so children do not need to snatch.

#### **School children**

- Praise older children when they play and share.

## Activities to help children express their feelings

Young children can have very powerful feelings. They do not always have the language skill to talk about how they are feeling. Some activities can help young children to express their feelings.

- Dressing up
- Drawing and painting
- Dough play
- Home corner
- Building and knocking down bricks and towers
- Hammer and pegs
- Sand play
- Water play



This article is an excerpt from the book

**Caring for Children**

By Penny Tassoni

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This article discusses the importance of play and practical activities for children. The book is useful for people taking an introductory course in childcare and education. Parents will also find the book interesting as well as it has lots of information about how children grow and develop; ideas on care routines for children; food and nutrition advice; promoting positive behaviour, etc.