



The Parenting Buzz

The Importance of Play

Play helps to develop a healthy mind and body and a sense of well-being. It helps to build a child's "capacity for communication" as well as their language and thinking skills. Play helps children build a sense of self and develops their social and emotional skills enabling them to participate proficiently in relationships. Through play, children are encouraged to connect to the world around them, immerse themselves in their culture, engage with others and to appreciate other ways of knowing, doing and being (Early Childhood Australia, 2023).

The 6 Stages of Play

In the 1930s a sociologist called Mildred Parten suggested children progress through 6 stages of play. These stages are:

- **Unoccupied Play (birth - 3 months)**
- **Solitary Play (3 months - 2 years)**
- **Spectator / Onlooker Behaviour (2 years)**
- **Parallel Play (2+ years)**
- **Associate Play (3-4 years)**
- **Social / Cooperative Play (4-5+ years)**



The 6 Stages of Play

Unoccupied Play (birth – 3 months) – During this stage a baby just makes lots of movements with their arms, legs, hands and feet. During this phase they are learning how their body moves. There isn't much adult involvement during this stage. You can give them something interesting to look at. At this age babies find it easiest to focus on high contrast colours, such as black and white.

Solitary Play (3 months – 2 years) – During this stage a child plays alone, they entertain themselves. They have no interest in playing with others. They play with toys and explore the environment. This type of play is self-directed. Children should be given a variety of toys to play with to help them develop their cognitive skills as well as their fine and gross motor skills. Children learn about the world through their senses. Encourage safe toys and objects which help to stimulate the senses (for example, bright colours, noise makers, different textures, smells, water play and splashing in the bath, push and pull toys, and so on).

Spectator / Onlooker Behaviour (2 years) – This is when children begin to watch other kids playing but they don't actually play with other kids yet. They are observing what other children are doing while they are playing. Don't push kids to engage with the other children. By observing others, they are learning the rules of playing with others, social skills such as rules, social cues, turn taking, boundaries, etc.

Parallel Play (2+ years) – During this stage, children will play next to other children but not actually play with them. They will be playing the same game or with the same toys but not engage with the other children, so they will play on the floor space next to the other kids but they won't overlap in the area they are playing in. In this stage the children are moving closer and engaging in the same play but not interacting, they are still learning the skills needed to interact with the other children.

Associate Play (3-4 years) – This is when children begin to interact with each other during play but there isn't much interaction. They may begin to ask some questions and make some comments to those kids around them. They are beginning to understand how to get along with others. But they are still more focused on their own play than on what the other children are doing. They are learning to communicate, collaborate and problem solve. In this stage of play it is important there are plenty of toys for all children to play with as they have not yet learnt the skills essential for sharing.

Social / Cooperative Play (4-5+ years) – When a child plays with other children and is interested in both the activity and the other child or children he or she is playing with. This is when the children really begin to cooperate, they may be working towards a common goal (such as building a tower using blocks). During this stage, the children will be involved in social conflict with the other children as they learn to take turns, share and compromise (Essential Resources, 2023).

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is when an adult takes on a supportive role in the child's learning, enabling a child to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which is just beyond their abilities. The adult may make the learning concept or skill easier to understand and learn by breaking it down into smaller, easier to understand parts.

Scaffolding is important for all children, especially those with learning difficulties and special needs, as the learning process can be adapted to meet the child's individual needs. The adult can support and guide the child or children through the learning process. This helps to reduce stress and anxiety as they are being supported through the process and to achieve something that is slightly above their capabilities, which can help build their confidence.

In play scaffolding can be used to provide more opportunities for children to learn. The adult takes on the role of facilitator, guiding the children to help create more opportunities for them to learn. Children have a higher chance of learning if they are engaged in the activity, and by playing, children are actively involved in playing and doing, which makes the experience more enjoyable for them. Scaffolding can be used for many skill building activities, including social skills and as children begin to learn the skills, they will need lessening support from adults.

Play and Children with Disability

Play is essential for learning and development in all children. But when we have a child or children with special needs, play can play a very important role in the development of social & emotional skills, communication and language skills, physical skills and cognitive skills. It can also help to develop the skills or areas that your child has particular difficulties with. You may need to adapt the play to consider your child's strengths, challenges and interests. You may need to consider sensory sensitivities as well as accessibility. Don't forget though, it is very important that children are given the freedom during play to make their own choices about what they would like to play as well as how they are going to play.

Play and Areas of Development

Play helps children develop their social and emotional skills, their communication and language, physical development as well as cognitive development (which is your child's ability to think, understand, communicate, problem solve, remember, make memories, imagine, engage in creative thinking and work out what might happen next).

Social and Emotional Skills

In the area of social and emotional skills, children are given opportunities to express themselves (their thoughts, feelings, emotions, reactions). It can be an excellent way for children to release stress and negative feelings. They have fun and feel included and supported. They can observe how others play, imitate or copy children around them, create interactions and friendships. They begin to learn about sharing, cooperating, being patient and problem solving. Play not only allows children to have an awareness of others but also, they increase their awareness of themselves and discover what they like to do, what helps them calm down or what they might find interesting and intriguing. They begin to discover what types of people they enjoy spending time with and what toys and spaces they find the most enjoyable or relaxing. Play can be great for a child's self-esteem and helps them to build social skills, independence and emotional resilience.

Communication and Language

During play, children have many opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings. They can learn what activities and communication can help them regulate their emotions. They communicate with others, not only through verbal communication but also through body language and signing or gestures. They learn to listen and observe others and can learn from the communication styles of the other children. They also begin to negotiate and make decisions.

Physical Development

One of the fabulous things about play is that it has endless opportunities and unlimited variations. There is play that involves loud, boisterous, big movements, crazy play and then you can have quiet, gentle sitting play. Play that involves jumping, running, building, dancing, climbing, crawling, throwing, threading, weaving, drawing, cutting, grasping ... the opportunities are endless. And with all this body movement comes physical development. Play helps children develop their fine motor skills, which are the smaller muscles of the hands and fingers as well as their gross motor skills, which involve the larger muscles of the legs, arms and torso. Children also participate in activities which help their coordination, balance, spatial awareness, strength and stamina.

Cognitive Development

Through play children develop their problem-solving skills, they use their imagination and express themselves through creativity. They develop their concentration and exploration skills, curiosity, persistence and resilience. They incorporate different concepts into their play, such as colours, letters, reading, writing, shapes, counting, measurement, money, etc. They may learn how stories work, such as a plot, characters and setting. They can learn that objects can be used for something else, such as a block can be used as a phone or a plate can be used as a steering wheel.

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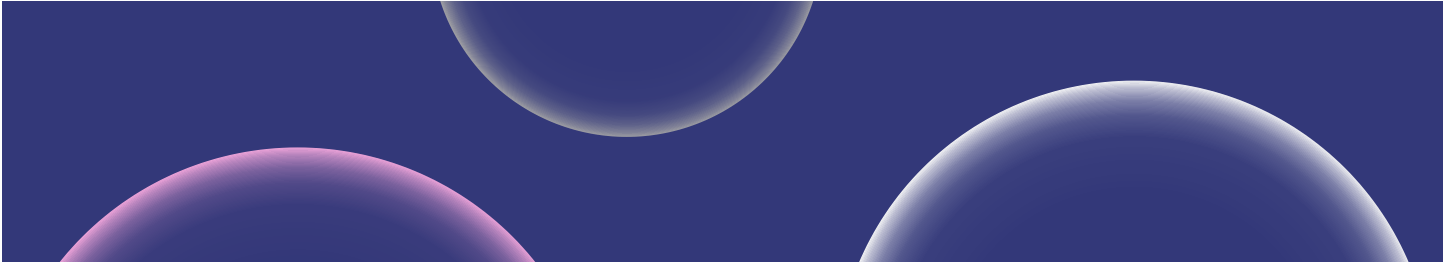
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