

Play

What is Play?

Play is both a natural and essential part of a child's development. Play helps children make sense of the world around them. Through play, children learn life skills in a way that feels enjoyable and meaningful to them. Play teaches children to communicate, problem solve, and build relationships. It helps them grow socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

Why Play is Important for Language Development

Play integrates listening, speaking, thinking, and social interaction in a natural and engaging way, making it one of the most effective tools for supporting language development.

- **Play Provides Natural Contexts for Language Use**

During play, children engage in real or imagined scenarios that require communication—whether negotiating rules, describing roles, or expressing thoughts. This provides practical, meaningful opportunities to use and hear language in context, reinforcing vocabulary and grammar.

- **Supports Conversational Skills**

Play involves turn-taking, listening, and responding—fundamental aspects of dialogue. Children learn how to initiate, maintain, and close conversations, as well as how to adjust their speech based on context and audience.

- **Stimulates Narrative Thinking**

Pretend play often involves storytelling. Children create and sequence events, describe characters and settings, and use narrative structures—which are foundational for both oral and written language skills

- **Builds Social Communication Skills**

Engaging in peer play is crucial for the development of pragmatic language skills. Through interactions with others, children learn to interpret tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language, as well as understand how their own nonverbal cues are perceived. These experiences also help them to understand other's perspectives. Additionally, navigating and negotiating play rules, can enhance their higher-level communication and reasoning skills.

- **Boosts Confidence and Motivation**

Play is low-pressure and fun, allowing children to experiment with language without fear of making mistakes. This fosters a positive attitude toward communication and learning.

Mildred Parten's 6 Stages of Play Development

Unoccupied play (From Birth)

The earliest stage of play. During this stage, babies appear to be moving randomly — waving their arms and kicking their legs without clear purpose. However, these movements are part of a child's early development. They are beginning to explore how their bodies work and are starting to observe the world around them

Solitary Play (1-2 Years)

When a child plays alone. During this stage, children aren't interested in interacting with others. They are fully engaged in exploring their environment independently. Solitary play builds important skills like confidence, creativity, focus, and self-reliance. It also supports cognitive development as children learn to think independently and solve problems. This type of play is unstructured and child led.

Onlooker play (1 – 3 Years)

When children watch others play without joining in. While they don't seem actively involved, through observation, they are learning how play works, including the rules, roles, and social boundaries. During this stage, children are developing observation skills and building the confidence they need to join in with others.

Parallel play (1 – 3 Years)

When children play next to, but not directly with each other. Whilst playing, they may copy what the other child is doing or adjust their play based on what they see. This stage helps children learn to recognise emotions, understand social cues, and practice turn-taking and sharing. Parallel play develops the foundations for cooperative play.

Associative play (2 – 5 Years)

When children show increased interest in playing with others. They engage directly with peers - talking, sharing materials, or commenting on each other's play. The play remains unstructured and each child has their own goals. In this stage, children are learning important skills such as cooperation, communication, and understanding boundaries.

Cooperative play (3 – 5 years)

The most advanced stage of play, where children work towards a shared goal. Play becomes more organised, and each child often has a specific role within the activity. They follow agreed-upon rules and use their imagination to create shared scenarios. This stage helps children strengthen communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. They learn to take turns, negotiate, compromise, and take perspectives. Cooperative play also supports the development of confidence, independence, and strong friendships.

The age ranges provided are intended to be used only as a guideline. Mildred Parten did not specify exact ages for each play stage. These age ranges are commonly used in developmental research and early childhood education to reflect typical social development patterns.

Types of play

Competitive Play

Involves games with rules and clear winners and losers (e.g. board games). These activities help children learn important skills like turn-taking, teamwork, and emotional regulation.

Constructive Play

This type of play is about building and creating (e.g. building a tower out of blocks). This play encourages planning, persistence, and cooperation. Children must problem-solve and learn to adapt when things don't go as expected. It's a fun and rewarding way to build critical thinking and teamwork skills.

Pretend Play

Pretend Play Allows children to step into imaginary scenarios (e.g. being a doctor, or a pirate). It promotes creativity and self-expression, whilst supporting the development of language skills. It also helps children explore emotions, practice problem-solving, and build empathy by putting themselves in "someone else's shoes."

Physical Play

Physical Play Includes activities like climbing, running, jumping and skipping. It helps children develop fine and gross motor skills. Through movement, children learn coordination, balance, and spatial awareness.

Sensory Play

Sensory Play Engages the senses through hands-on exploration. Children learn about the world through direct experience. Sensory play helps children understand how things look, feel, sound, smell, and taste. It's also a great way for them to discover how objects can be changed or manipulated.

Strategies to Promote Play Skills:

- **Create a Play-Friendly Environment**

Set up a safe, inviting space with a variety of toys/materials that encourage different types of play.

- **Follow the Child's Lead**

Let your child choose what and how they want to play. Join in where possible, and allow them to lead.

- **Model Play Behaviours**

Show your child how to use toys or engage in imaginative play. Modelling helps children learn how to interact and encourages them to try new things.

- **Encourage Social Interaction**

Create opportunities for your child to play with others. Playdates, group activities, and family games all help build social skills like sharing, turn-taking, and cooperation.

- **Praise Effort, Not Outcomes**

Focus on what your child is trying to do, rather than whether it's "right."

- **Offer a Balance of Structured and Unstructured Play**

Structured games (like board games or sports) teach rules and teamwork, while unstructured free play encourages imagination and independence.

- **Encourage Different Types of Play**

Support your child's development by promoting a range of play types e.g. pretend, sensory, physical

- **Talk About Your Play**

During play, narrate what you and your child are doing.

- **Develop Scripts**

Develop and model scripts your child can imitate whilst playing with toys. This helps the child learn how to use language during play.

- **Practice During Routine Activities**

Encourage your child to role play the activities you are partaking in. For example, whilst you are cooking, offer toy kitchen items so your child can pretend to cook alongside you.

References

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