Children play alone for a number of reasons and it is a natural step in the development of children’s play behaviour. Children learn through play and therefore will play alone before they have learnt to form the relationships they will need to play together. Playing alone gives children the time they need to think, explore and create. It is therefore not necessary for them to constantly be interacting with adults or other children.

Modern family living means that more than one-quarter of U.K. households have just one child. More and more children are growing up without brothers and sisters as playmates. These children often play alone because of a lack of available playmates. Play changes during early childhood. Playing alone is the first step of play development, before children have learnt how to interact with others during play time. Children will learn reactions and signals when their parents and minders play with them from the time they are born but will not yet have the skills to play together with them until later in their development.

‘Solitary play’ (playing alone) is followed by ‘parallel play’ – playing ‘next to’ but not ‘with’ other children – at around two or three years of age. An example of parallel play is when children can be observed playing individually but in a group setting, for example at a play group. Each child benefits from the group setting and from observing and often copying others, but will not interact directly with the other children.

At around age three or four children begin to play with others, including pretend and fantasy play in which they share in the same ‘fantasy’ together. In playing out the components of the fantasy, they are adding to each other’s play experience and imagination.

The early stages of play behaviour do not entirely disappear as they develop. Children will continue to sometimes play alone, and sometimes next to others, even though they can play well with other children. In one study preschool children were observed over a nine month period. There was an increase in group play and a decrease in playing alone during this period, while parallel play did not vary much. Some two year olds went through each stage of play, first solitary play, then parallel, then group play. Some three and four year olds alternated between periods of group play and periods of playing alone.

There is no right or wrong way to play, this process varies from child to child and is a very natural part of development.

Once children reach nursery school they should be able to play well with other children. Nevertheless solitary play still has its uses and not only for the many children without available playmates.

Positive aspects of solitary play
Guidelines for early childhood programmes stress the importance of playing alone for toddlers (http://www.naeyc.org/):

• freedom to use their imagination
• learning and practising physical and mental skills
• being able to make their own rules for play
• not having to meet anyone else’s expectations
Both boys and girls had similar patterns of the child’s independence and maturity. In one study, solitary play was related to nursery school children tend to solitary play does not disappear. Preschool develops at around age three or four, (playing together) others, especially strangers. others because they are insecure around school and nursery school. Some children free play’ in pre-
common in early childhood, occurring 10 play without joining in. /T_h is is fairly
Some children may watch other children play alone, it should still be fun; it is still
Whatever the reasons children choose to play alone, it should still be fun; it is still play. Make sure you have appropriate play materials available to encourage all types of play activities.

The play setting

The play setting, for example indoors or outdoors, as well as the playthings available, affects how children play. For instance, playgrounds tend to promote many solitary play behaviours, such as swinging, running, skipping, and climbing. Because children take turns on the swings, climbing frames, and slides, we might call this ‘serial play,’ because they are co-operating by taking turns but not truly interacting with one another. This type of solitary play contributes to children’s co-ordination, self-confidence, co-operation, learning to set limits, and the many benefits of being physically active.

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For further information:


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