

# Playing alone



**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.

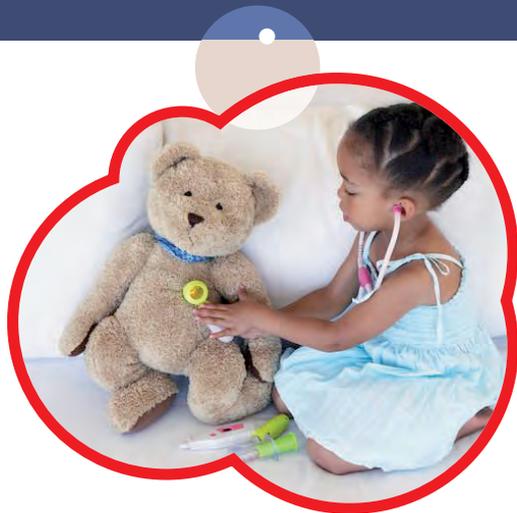
Once children reach nursery school they should be able to play well with other children. Nevertheless solitary play still has its uses and not only for the many children without available playmates.

## **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





- being fully engaged in an activity (the experience of 'flow')
- exploring, creating, and learning how things work

### Forms of solitary play

There are many types of solitary play and many reasons for playing alone. Solitary play should not be used to identify unsociable children.

Playing alone includes a wide range of solitary behaviours. For example, one child might be off in the corner drawing a picture with crayons. This child might appear to be very absorbed in his or her activity and quite content to play alone. Another child might stand against the wall counting stones, whilst out of one eye watching as a group of children play happily together. Despite an apparent interest in the group, this child makes no attempt to join in. Another child might be walking through the room, loudly banging two wooden blocks together and talking to himself.

Some children may watch other children play without joining in. This is fairly common in early childhood, occurring 10 – 20% of the time during 'free play'\* in pre-school and nursery school. Some children may play alone despite a desire to play with others because they are insecure around others, especially strangers.

Even though 'social play' (playing together) develops at around age three or four, solitary play does not disappear. Preschool and nursery school children tend to alternate between solitary and social play. In one study, solitary play was related to the child's independence and maturity. Both boys and girls had similar patterns of

social and solitary play, but girls engaged in more educational solitary play.

There is a difference between playing alone either because toddlers are too young to play with peers or there is no one with whom to play, and playing alone by choice even when other playmates are available. There may well be times your child chooses to play alone even when other playmates are available. In some instances or if this behaviour is seen all the time, this type of solitary play is known as 'reticent play' due to your child's reluctance to join in. It is sometimes – but not always – considered a sign of anxiety or of a child's poor social skills. Reticent behaviour has been associated with elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

For example if a child of four or five years of age rarely or indeed never chooses to engage in social play, this may be an indication of shyness, language problems or a limited understanding of others. It may also be as a result of bullying so it would be worth considering contacting an expert such as your local GP for further investigation.

Among toddlers, the main focus of solitary play is on learning how to do things. For older children, solitary play is often educational. Solitary activities that involve manipulating objects, such as building blocks, help to develop abstract thinking and language.

The most common types of solitary play are construction play, such as building with blocks, artwork, fitting a puzzle together, and exploration, such as examining objects to learn about them ('how do things work?'). These occur about one-third of the time during indoor free play in early childhood. These types of solitary play set the stage for many later activities, including reading, creativity, and language.

'Solitary active play' includes repeated simple activities with or without toys or other objects, for example, banging two wooden blocks together, filling a bucket with sand and pouring it out. Children often do these things for the simple

enjoyment of the physical sensations that they create but can also teach them things like 'cause and effect'. Solitary active play also includes playing make-believe while playing alone, or with an imaginary companion. This is a bridge between solitary play and true social play.

'Solitary imaginative play' can strengthen healthy development. A child alone in his or her room using an action figure in an imaginary story displays abstract thinking, language and creativity.

### 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.

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.

\* 'free play' – unrestricted movement activity or interplay.

### For further information:

Robert J. Coplan. (2011). Not just 'playing alone': Exploring multiple forms of nonsocial play in childhood. In A. D. Pellegrini (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play*. Oxford University Press.

Kenneth H. Rubin. (1982). Nonsocial play in preschoolers: Necessarily evil? (1982). *Child Development*, 53, 651-657.

Nancy V. Moore, Carolyn M. Evertson, & Jere E. Brophy. (1974). Solitary play: Some functional reconsiderations. *Developmental Psychology*, 10, 830-834.

Peter K. Smith. (1978). A longitudinal study of social participation in preschool children: Solitary and parallel play re-examined. *Developmental Psychology*, 14, 517-523.

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