

Playing together



When children play together, adults refer to this as 'social play.' However there are a number of steps children take to reach the level of play that we call social.

Playing next to, but not with other children (*parallel play*) is a step in this process. It becomes social play when children ask others – peers, siblings, a parent – to join in. Children playing near each other are getting ready to reach out to their play neighbours and become part of their games. When children play together or with an adult they must communicate with one another so that both play partners understand the rules of their play. Both children must want to play together for the play to be satisfying. Setting the rules for play, when to begin and when to stop, may be as important as the play itself. Children must communicate and cooperate in order to play well together which in turn helps them learn to get along with others.

Social play requires play partners to agree on the rules of play. A 'tea party' requires the children to agree on the imaginary scene, and to pretend that there is tea in the empty teapot and tea cups. By preschool age, children's imagination and

language skills enable them to engage in '*social pretend play*'. Children can plan and manage their fantasy play easily and can modify the story as it progresses. This helps them develop important social skills.

Children naturally differ in personality, ability, and friendliness. They differ emotionally and linguistically, all of which influence their social play with adults and peers. Some children approach social play with enthusiasm. They run and shout their way into children's play groups. Others are slow to find their place, sad to leave the side of the parent, and slow to find playmates and activities pleasurable. Social play is a sign of social competence in the toddler and preschool periods.

Socially competent children act as leaders in social play. They are more likely to share toys, and are generally friendly and co-

operative. Siblings can become skillful at sharing and building on one another's ideas and moving towards ever more challenging play. Over time the story lines of social play become more rich and complex, suggesting that both siblings benefit from social play as they learn together even when one child is less skillful than the other.

The Early Years

Mother – infant play with toys helps promote language development. In one study, infants from 11 to 17 months were observed during a '*free play*' session with their mothers. As they aged from 11 months to 14 months, children initiated play sessions more often. Mothers who joined in their children's play, who helped their child play with toys, and who talked about what they were doing together, helped their child's speech development. With age and experience, the social play of children becomes more complex. Among well-acquainted toddlers aged 16 – 38 months, play develops from solitary pretend play, to social play, and then social pretend (role) play.

Between the ages of two and six years, peer relationships become increasingly important in relation to children's play. Often children enact make-believe roles taken from the



work of the adults around them, such as playing shop or mummies and daddies. The potential exists in role-play to help children learn how others think and feel.

Today's children spend less time playing with others than children did 20 years ago. In the past 20 years the proportion of time that preschoolers spent in social play decreased from almost half of their play time to less than 10%. This is partly a result of reduced opportunities for play – fewer playgrounds, less freedom to play outdoors, and smaller families.

Middle childhood and beyond

Interest in social pretend play fades after the early childhood years as school becomes more formal and children are less likely to make time for fantasy play. However enjoyment of social pretend play does not end with early childhood. By looking only at young children's play we may miss the similarities between social fantasy play in children and adult behaviour. Adults too enjoy social fantasy play, including organised sports, board and card games, theatre, and online role-playing games where each player assumes the role of a particular character. For instance, in the fantasy role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons, with both traditional and online versions, each player assumes the role of a particular character. Board games and computer-based games that allow players to construct fantasy figures and imaginary worlds promote the development of imagination and creativity from middle childhood through to adulthood.

Culture and play

Pretend play, including role play, is found in all cultures. What appears to differ by culture is not whether there is pretend play, but how often children engage in pretense, the make-believe themes that children enact, and whether parents become involved in their children's play.

If adults believe that play is valuable for children, they will provide toys and make time available for play.

Many children in the U.K. have teachers or care-givers from different cultural groups. Play with adults or children from a different cultural background may be different than play with a parent or sibling. For example, research shows that mothers from some non-Western cultures use adult-child play to instruct children in manners and social customs, while many Western mothers use adult-child play as preparation for school. Mothers in rural Mexico believe that social play is best when children play with other children, therefore mother-child play is not valued or practised. Japanese mothers focus more on social interactions and communication in play with their toddlers. American mothers use play as a context for teaching- they emphasise how toys are to be used, and talk more about the characteristics of the toys themselves. They also use play to teach their children about the world and to encourage them to explore it on their own.

Particular play partners – for example parents, siblings, and peers – influence children's make-believe play. When mothers play with their children, pretend play lasts longer and is more diverse. Mothers support more complex pretend play in children through suggestions, giving directions, and demonstrations. For example, showing a child how a toy works, describing it, and asking questions, all strengthen the child's imaginative play. Having said that, part of the beauty of pretend play is allowing children the freedom to lead play, lose inhibitions and develop their imaginations and creativity. Children should be given time to play without adult input to allow them the freedom to develop naturally without instruction.

If parents think that social pretend play is important then they will provide opportunities for children to engage in this type of play.

How to encourage social play

By providing support, time, space, and toys, adults can encourage children to play



together. The careful selection of toys can lead a child to play either alone or with others. In one study, children in an urban recreation centre (average age seven years) were provided with toys designed for social or solitary play. The social toys included board games, pick-up-sticks, draughts, and a deck of playing cards. The toys for solitary play included a gyroscope, crayons, model cars, a jigsaw puzzle, and modelling clay. It was found that children played with others only 16% of the time when 'solitary toys' were provided, whereas social play occurred three-quarters of the time when children were provided with 'social toys'. So the selection of play materials should be an important consideration in any effort to promote children's social development.

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

Much of the information in this leaflet is based on Carrollee Howes. (2011). Social play of children with adults and peers. And Robert D. Kavanaugh. (2011). Origins and consequences of social pretend play.

For further information:

Stuart Brown. (2009). *Play*. Penguin.

Carrollee Howes. (2011). *Social play of children with adults and peers*. In A. D. Pellegrini (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play*. Oxford University Press.

Robert D. Kavanaugh. (2011). *Origins and consequences of social pretend play*. In A. D. Pellegrini (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play*. Oxford University Press.

Lisa A. Newland, Laurie A. Roggman, & Lisa K. Boyce. (2001). *The development of social toy play and language in infancy*. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 24, 1-25

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