



Why Is Play so Important? (cont.)

A sensitive adult can help children play successfully with each other. A child who has a difficult time playing with peers might play better with a little bit of help. The adult can also help toddlers' continue to play together. Much like the Tasia and Jo Jo's story earlier, it is not unusual for infants or toddlers to want a toy someone already has. When someone else is playing with a toy, it's like a commercial that just makes that toy look like so much fun!

Sometimes kids can work these differences out without help. It can be very interesting to watch the negotiation! However, if it looks like children might start hurting each other, then an adult will need to step in and encourage children to find ways to solve the conflict. Very young children may need suggestions from an adult to come up with possible solutions to work out their negotiations. A caregiver may suggest children can trade toys, do something else until their friend is done with the toy, or ask the child for the toy when she is done.

Learning About the World Through Play

Play is an important way that infants and toddlers interact with the people and objects around them. Through these interactions they learn about their world.

Understanding Concepts Through Mastery Play

At drop-off, nine-month-old Hannah cries as her mother hands her over to her caregiver, Jenna. Hannah has spent the past six months with Jenna and knows her well. Jenna explains to Hannah's mother that at nine months, Hannah is just starting to understand that her mother is still "out there somewhere," even when she cannot see her. This makes Hannah sad that she can't be with her mother all of the time. After Hannah is calm, Jenna plays peek-a-boo with her. Jenna chooses this game because it helps Hannah begin to understand that while a person may "disappear," he or she will come back. Hannah delights in the disappearance and reappearance of her beloved teacher.

Mastery play is when play is used to practice (or master) skills and ideas.^[10] An example of that is in the previous vignette. At about eight to ten months, babies may begin to show signs of **separation anxiety**. A baby who may have been very happy going to child care might suddenly have a hard time saying good-bye to her family. This is because the baby has begun to master the concept of **object permanence**—a person or object continues to exist even when it can no longer be seen. Not surprisingly, babies at this age seem to enjoy the game of peek-a-boo, which gives them a chance to practice and test out this new idea. Playing also gives children a sense of control, which can be comforting. In the previous vignette, Hannah cannot stop her mother from leaving, but she can hide herself under a blanket and reappear whenever she likes.



Learning About the World Through Play (cont.)

Another important concept babies develop through play is **cause and effect**, or learning that an action can cause something to happen. Some of the first cause-and-effect experiences are when babies cry and someone comes to comfort them. Babies are learning that crying brings adults to care for their needs. Another way babies learn about cause and effect is by playing with objects; for example, if you push a ball it will roll away from you. If you shake a maraca, it makes a sound. Play is a way that infants and toddlers learn about complicated ideas through simple and repeated experiences.

Play and Problem Solving

Three-month-old Diego lies on his back and mouths a rattle. He loses his grip on the rattle and it falls on his chest. Now he must find the rattle in order to keep playing with it.

Thirteen-month-old Samora understands a lot about blocks. She's spent a great deal of time knocking down towers built by her mom and home visitor, but now she is trying to build one of her own. She has two stacked and is placing a third block on the pile. Before she even lets the block go, the tower falls down!

Two-year-old Micah is running outside with his friends to play. Both he and Jayla run to the same bike. The two each try to climb onto the bike at the same time.

These children are all at the threshold of learning. What an exciting place for them to be! Will Diego find his rattle? Will Samora build her block tower? Who will get the bike, Jayla or Micah? These exciting episodes of discovery are happening every day in your group and during socializations. Children are using the skills they have in play, and their curiosity and interest push them to a point where they are going to have to learn something new in order to continue their play.

It might seem very difficult to watch Diego struggle with his rattle. He might seem frustrated and confused about what to do next. Observe him for a moment; let the frustration lead him toward a solution. The moment where his hand brushes the rattle on his chest is a thrilling moment of discovery for him! Of course, if a baby gets stuck or might get hurt, an adult should keep them safe. When you give babies a chance to solve the problems they create through play, it helps them learn new skills.^[11]





Learning About the World Through Play (cont.)

Play and Language

During a home visit three-month-old Dejah is making gurgles and coos to her mother. Her mother, Donna, waits for a quiet moment and then copies the sounds Dejah makes. The two have a playful conversation back and forth while their home visitor smiles nearby.

Mayanna sits on the floor with the babies. Ten-month-old Nita crawls into her lap. Nita grabs Mayanna's hands and begins to clap them. Mayanna says, "You want to play patty cake!" as they clap and sing together. Mayanna ends the chant with the phrase, "Put it in the oven for Nita and me!"

Twenty-eight-month-old Christian's favorite part of coming to socializations is the dramatic play area. He goes over and puts on his favorite hat and grabs a briefcase. He walks back over to his mom and says, "I go." His mother, Christina, says, "You are going somewhere. Where are you going?" Christian says, "Work." Christina responds, "You are going to work. What will you do there?" Their conversation continues with Christian giving small answers to her questions and his mother listening and responding to him.

As children grow and learn, their ability to understand and use language in play is growing as well. Even at the earliest stages of language development babies enjoy playing with sounds and hearing others make playful sounds too. Infants and toddlers love to hear songs especially when their names are used.

Play activities that involve adults are opportunities to use language with infants and toddlers. When playing with young babies, try repeating the sounds they are making. Babies can then make a sound with their voice and hear the same sound in your voice. They are likely to enjoy this game for many turns, and why not? This is an early form of conversation.

When infants' and toddlers' lives are full of songs and playful language they are likely to learn more words and have a better understanding of how to use them. It is important that adults who join in pretend play with children ask meaningful questions the child can answer in lots of different ways. Notice how Christian's mother turned his one-word answers into sentences and then asked him where he was going. She was asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions don't have a specific answer and the child can say whatever she likes and be "right." Some examples of open-ended questions are as follows: "Where is your car going?" or "What do you think happens next?" Open-ended questions encourage children to think and give them the opportunity to express their own ideas.