



What is Play? (cont.)

Your Own Cultural Lens for Looking at Play

Play is a part of every young child's life. How we play is different depending on our home life and culture.^[7] Some cultures provide lots of free time for play; whereas in other cultures, children spend less time playing. In some cultures, children's play is more cooperative; in others it is more competitive. Some families believe that play objects should be educational or store bought; other families might prefer or only be able to afford homemade toys. Just as children learn to speak the language they hear around them, the people and objects in their lives will provide structure for their play. Play is one way children learn and practice the values that are important to their families, how to interact with one another, and how to use the objects and language of their communities.

Take a moment to think about some of the messages you heard about play from your family growing up. How was play valued in your family? Did your parents, grandparents, siblings, or other family members spend time playing with you? Did you have lots of "educational" toys or store-bought items? Did you have many hours of unsupervised play or were you mostly involved in activities?



Why Is Play so Important?

Play benefits every aspect of child development. The act of play comes so naturally it seems to be little more than a simple, joyful experience. Many child development experts believe that play is how infants and toddlers learn about their world. Play provides children with opportunities to learn about and master relationships, language, math, science, problem solving, and their bodies. Let's look more deeply at all the ways play contributes to development.

Building Relationships Through Play

One of the most important things that young children learn through play is how to form and maintain relationships with others.



Why Is Play so Important? (cont.)

Play Builds Caregiver Relationships

Three-month-old Cayden lies in the lap of his in-home family caregiver, Julisa. Cayden stares at her and then coos. Julisa watches Cayden and repeats the sound he makes. Cayden smiles and wiggles as Julisa smiles back. Both Cayden and Julisa clearly enjoy their play together.

Even very young babies enjoy play. They make eye contact and sounds to their parents and caregivers. When the adult responds back to them, they might wiggle or coo. These back and forth interactions are the first steps toward forming a relationship, and are the “play” of very young infants.

Play is an important part of the relationship between babies and caregivers.^[8] Babies who have nurturing relationships in their lives have better play skills.^[9] These close relationships support infant’s and toddler’s play.

Play Builds Peer Relationships

Twelve-month-old Isaiah is standing at the door clapping his hands. He shouts “Hi” down the hallway. His caregiver, Elisa, comes to see who he is talking to. She realizes that fifteen-month-old Heidi is arriving with her mom. While Elisa greets them both, Heidi and Isaiah smile at each other and say, “Hi.” Isaiah toddles off to get a ball and turns to see if Heidi is following him. She is! He gets the ball and says to her, “Ball,” and hands it to her. Heidi takes the ball, and they begin to play by passing it back and forth.

Isaiah and Heidi might seem pretty young to be playing together. When babies have many opportunities to play together they begin to form early friendships. Have you ever noticed how even very young infants are interested in other babies? Maybe you’ve seen babies roll toward each other until they are close enough to touch. You may have noticed that some babies even seem to form friendships with each other. They might seek each other out every day, or you might notice they are pleased to spend time together. Each play episode adds a little bit more to the friendship, building up over time until children play easily together.



Why is Play so Important? (cont.)

Play Builds Social Skills

Thirteen-month-old Alliah takes her baby doll and brings it over to the chair where she and her friends eat. Alliah puts the baby in the chair and asks her caregiver for a spoon and bowl by pointing to the objects she wants. Alliah takes the spoon and scoops into the bowl and pretends to feed her baby. As she brings the spoon to the doll's mouth she says, "Mmmm."

Tasia and Jo Jo are two-year-olds who love the toy vacuum cleaner in their child care provider's home. If one of them has it, the other wants it. Jo Jo found it first today, and Tasia came over and tried to grab it from him. Their caregiver walked over to the struggling toddlers and said, "Tasia you really want the vacuum cleaner, but Jo Jo is playing with it right now. Can you ask him if you can have a turn when he is done?" Tasia and Jo Jo have been through this before. Tasia turns to Jo Jo and says, "Turn?" Jo Jo nods yes and continues to play for a moment, then brings the vacuum over to Tasia with a grin and says, "Here you go!"

Think about something you are really good at. Maybe it's changing a diaper on a wiggling baby. This is a skill that probably took some practice before you were such an expert. Play is a way children "practice" doing what they see the adults around them do. Older toddlers are likely to be found in the dramatic play area imitating the roles and routines they see around them every day.

It is not unusual to see a child feeding a baby doll and practicing other types of caregiving. Even younger babies might be seen chatting on a toy phone or gently holding a doll. Caregivers and parents can support this sort of play by providing props like dolls, dishes, and phones.

While it is always preferable to have multiples of a popular toy, sometimes it doesn't work out. Sometimes a toy that sat on the shelf for months without being noticed is suddenly a hot item! When two children both want the same toy, consider it one of the many opportunities presented through play for learning new social skills such as waiting and being patient. It is not developmentally appropriate to expect infants and toddlers to share a single toy. However, as they get older, they can understand the concept of taking turns. When toddlers are taking turns it can help for an adult to point out how patient they are while they wait for their toy. In the mean time, adults might offer the toddlers another play opportunity while waiting for their turn.



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.