



Families ... generations of strength

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Family & Consumer Sciences
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Children and Play

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Play is key to every child's well being. Children learn about the world and experience life through play. One definition of play is "the spontaneous activity of children." Through play, children practice the roles they will play later in life.

Play has many functions. It increases peer relationships, releases tensions, advances intellectual development, increases exploration, and increases chances of children speaking and interacting with each other (Santrock, 1994).

Infant Play — Birth to 2 years of age

Sensorimotor play is typical play behavior for children up to age two.

Children begin by selecting objects that give them a response, such as toys that make noise or bounce. These toys receive approval of smiles and giggles from infants. In turn, adults make sure the child's toy selection includes ones that stimulate their senses and enhance their motor skill development.

Between the first and second year, children begin to understand the meaning of objects. The child begins to incorporate this new knowledge into play, but often in a humorous manner. The child will call animals by different names. For example, a child may say a cow says "oink-oink." The child will also pretend objects are used for other purposes such as using a banana for a phone. This is the beginning of dramatic play.

Toddler Play — Ages 2 to 4

Children begin making the transition to toddlerhood around the age of two.

By this age they realize one thing can stand for another. By processing this knowledge, toddlers are able to imitate or imagine events in ways they do not exist. Through this fantasy play, children can examine events and relationships in ways that are different from the original intent.

For example, three- and four-year-olds understand a sponge is really a sponge. They also can pretend it is a boat skiing across the lake or a basketball sliding through the net.

Early School Age — 4 to 6 years of age

Children in preschool and early elementary grades continue to use fantasy play. They also begin to show interest in group play. Group play is more structured and is based more on reality than fantasy.

Group play usually involves a few rules. The rules allow the child to begin developing independence yet cooperation with partners. Often early school-age games allow the children to change roles frequently so they begin to experience many perspectives.

This less-structured group play provides a transition between fantasy play and more structured team sports which begin in elementary grades.

Examples of group play games include hide-and-seek, red-rover, and ring-around-the-rosie.

Resources

Learning to play with children requires adults to have a willingness to think and act like a child. Often as adults get involved with work, family, and personal responsibilities, they forget the spontaneity of childhood.

Allow yourself to be creative and get dirty. Often the child will take the lead and assign the adult a role to play.

Many resource books are available on play. Look for books that provide hands-on activities as well as theory-based information. Sources of information include:

- local libraries
- teacher supply stores
- local bookstores
- garage sales
- child-care information-referral centers
- day-care providers
- county Extension offices.

References

Newman, B. M. & Newman, P. R. (1995). *Development through life: a psychological approach (6th ed.)*. Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

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Ulene, A. & Shelov, S. (1994). *Discovery play: loving and learning with your baby*. Burbank, California: Feeling Fine Company LLC.