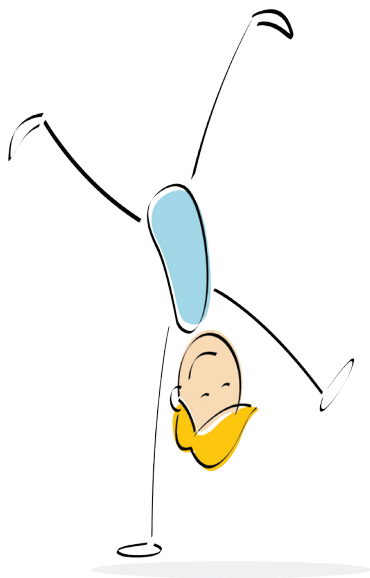


From Infancy On: The Many Perks of PLAY

BY JANINE HALLORAN



Play is vitally important for children. More and more research confirms its importance and why it should be an integral part of a child's life. Consider the benefits:

- Humans are biologically wired to play. Play serves as a way for people to practice skills they will need in the future.
- Play allows children to practice decision-making skills, learn to work in groups, share, resolve conflicts, and advocate for themselves. It also allows them to discover what they enjoy at their own pace.
- Play "is critical for becoming socially adept, coping with stress, and building cognitive skills such as problem solving," according to research in *Scientific American* magazine.
- Play is so important that it's even part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 states that children have the right "to engage in play and recreational activities."

Development of Social Play

As children develop and grow, so does their way of playing. Children typically move through six stages of social play.

1. Unoccupied play

Did you know play starts at birth? Infants engage in random movements with seemingly no clear purpose, but this is actually the beginning of play.

2. Solitary play

This is when children start to play on their own. Solitary play begins in infancy and is common in toddlers. However, all age groups can (and should) have some time for independent play. When engaged in solitary play, children do not seem to notice other children sitting or playing nearby.

3. Onlooker play

The next stage of play is when children watch others play. Onlooker play happens most frequently during the toddler years, but can happen at

any age. The onlooker may ask questions of other children, but there is no effort to join in. This may happen when a child is shy, unsure of the rules, or is hesitant to join the game.

4. Parallel play

Parallel play starts when children begin to play side-by-side with other children without any interaction. Parallel play is usually found with toddlers, although it happens in any age group. Even though it seems as if they are not interacting, the children are paying attention to each other. This is the beginning of a desire to be with other children their own age and lays the groundwork for the later stages of play.

5. Associative play

At around 3 to 4 years of age, they become more interested in other children than toys. They begin asking questions, talking about the toys and what they are making. This is the beginning of really understanding how to get along with others. During associative play, children within the group have similar goals (for example: building a creation out of blocks). However, they do not set



• **Creative Play:** allows children to explore, try new ideas, and use their imagination. They can use many different items, altering something and making something new.

• **Communication Play:** play using words and gestures, e.g., charades, telling jokes, play acting, etc.

• **Dramatic Play:** play where children figure out roles to perform, assign them, and then act them out.

• **Locomotor Play:** movement for movement's sake, just because it's fun. This includes chase, tag, hide and seek, and tree climbing.

• **Deep Play:** play that allows the child to encounter risky experiences and conquer fears such as heights, snakes, and creepy crawlies. Children can find strength they never knew they had to climb obstacles, lift large objects, etc.

• **Exploratory Play:** using senses of smell, touch, and even taste to explore and discover the texture and function of things around them. An example of this would be a baby mouthing an object.

• **Fantasy Play:** this is the make-believe world of children. This type of play is where the child's imagination gets to run wild and they get to play out activities that are that are unlikely to occur in their everyday life, like being a pilot or driving a car.

• **Imaginative Play:** where the conventional rules that govern the physical world do not apply, like imagining you are a bee or pretending you have wings.

• **Mastery Play:** control of the physical and affective ingredients of the environments, like digging holes or constructing shelters.

• **Object Play:** play that uses sequences of hand-eye manipulations and movements, like using a paintbrush.

• **Role Play:** exploring ways of being, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic, or interpersonal nature. For example, brushing with a broom, dialing with a telephone, driving a car.

• **Recapitulative Play:** allows the child to explore ancestry, history, rituals, stories, rhymes, fire, and darkness.

There are so many ways to play and one playtime can actually encompass multiple types of play. Playing pirates can include rough and tumble play, symbolic play, dramatic play, communication play, social

rules and there is no formal organization.

6. Social play

Children will really begin to socialize starting around 3 or 4. They begin to share ideas and toys, and follow established rules and guidelines. They figure out who will play what role. They can work together to build something or maybe play a simple game together. This is really where a child learns and practices social skills like cooperating, being flexible, taking turns, and solving problems.

Types of Play

There are so many ways to play. When you think "play," you may believe there are only one or two different ways that a child interacts with toys. In reality, play is actually quite varied and can fall into many different category types. There are 16 recognized (yes, 16!) different types of play. These categories often overlap, but here are the myriad ways children play.

• **Symbolic Play:** using objects, actions, or ideas to represent other objects, actions, or ideas, e.g., using a cardboard tube like a telescope.

• **Rough and Tumble Play:** close-encounter play, which is less to do with fighting and more to do with gauging relative strength. It's discovering physical flexibility and the exhilaration of display, and is generally friendly and positive. This type of play can burn up a lot of energy.

• **Socio-Dramatic Play:** when children act out experiences — playing house, going to a restaurant, or pretending to grocery shop.

• **Social Play:** any social or interactive situation in which the expectation is that everyone will follow set rules, such as during a game or making a craft together.

play, fantasy play, and imaginative play!

Recent Troubling Trends

The emphasis on academics, structured classes, and activities has limited the amount of time that children are able to spend simply playing and exploring. What has been overlooked in all of the focus on academics and lessons is the fact that play is the best way for children to learn.

A 2014 National Public Radio report states that play helps children's brains develop and make more connections. Children in play-based kindergartens have an advantage over those who are denied play: they end up equally good or better at reading and other intellectual skills, and they are more likely to become well-adjusted healthy people, according to a 2009 report from the Alliance for Childhood, "Crisis In the Kindergarten: Why Children Need Play In School."

What You Don't Need

Not listed in the types of play outlined earlier are fancy gadgets and toys with all the bells and whistles. Play doesn't require 15 materials, lots of money, or things. Children can easily use items already in a home. Have you ever noticed that kids love to play with the boxes that toys come in more than the toys themselves? Let them do that! A lot of fun can be had with items as simple as a cardboard box and markers.

What Parents Can Do

Here are two simple action steps parents can take to encourage play at home:

1. Set aside one weekday to be free

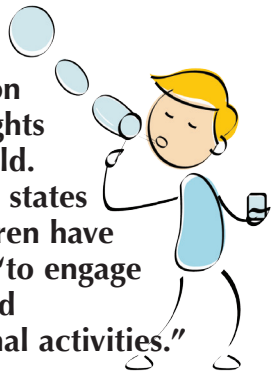
of scheduled, structured activities or lessons. Allow children to play with different materials around the house. You could use items from the recycling bin, crayons and paper, or a bunch of blocks. See where their imagination takes them and watch what they do. Try to use open-ended toys (those that don't have only one set way of being used), such as blocks, stuffed animals, or play dough. This will encourage children to be more creative and try different ways of playing. You can even set out two or three different types of open-ended toys, like blocks, figures and cars. They may create a whole world!

2. Establish a family game night. Introduce your children to some of your favorite games from your childhood. Board games and card games are great ways to practice taking turns, losing and winning graciously, and flexibility. Plus, they can play some of these new games they learned with their friends when they visit. It's great to spend time playing together as a family.

And play is great for parents, too. Being an adult doesn't mean you have to stop playing. There's some great work being done about integrating play into the workplace and how that can improve outcomes. Play should be a part of everyday life, for you and your children. ♡

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