



TYPES OF PLAY

What is it?

Play is not only enjoyable for a child, but it is how they learn about the world and engage with others. At first, adults typically choose the environments, activities, and people the child will engage with. As a child grows, they begin to choose these items. While each child develops at a unique rate, below is a general list of the stages of play. Speak with your occupational therapist for further information about development of play and how to assist your child with developing skills.

First Few Months

At first an infant looks and listens. They will stare at brightly coloured or high contrast objects and listen to voices. As they develop they are able to hold objects and smile in response to social interactions. Infants' play consists mainly of imitation such as imitating mouth movements or gestures of their caregivers.

Sensorimotor and Exploratory Play

Once children can pick up and hold onto objects, they begin to learn the effect of their actions on objects and people in the environment. (i.e.: banging a toy onto a table teaches a child about how much force it takes to make different sounds). Children tend to like cause and effect toys at this stage (example: press a button and a song starts) as well as putting things together and taking them apart. In addition, children begin to learn object meanings and begin to group objects based on how they are alike. Children in this stage tend to prefer playing on their own or alongside others, rather than engaging with them.

Symbolic or Pretend Play

In this stage, children begin to act out situations that are different than reality. Children will use objects in ways that they are not intended (i.e.: a lego block as a phone). In this stage, children will also increase their social play by playing alongside others as well as interacting with peers and/or caregivers.

Sociodramatic or Social Play

As play develops, children begin to pretend to be different people and act out make-believe scenarios with other children or adults. An example of this could be acting like a mother who is comforting a child or a doctor who is helping a sick person. Children start to develop knowledge of social systems and cultural norms. Children are also beginning to develop more complex social skills, such as imitating other's social behaviours,

collaborative problem-solving, and reversing roles during play. These skills continue to develop as the child grows and is provided with opportunities to practice these skills.

Conventional Play

Conventional play involves rules that apply to all involved. For example, children play sports or board games where there are set expectations. Frequently children are observed to have frequent disagreements about who is obeying the rules or playing fair. This stage of play assists children with further developing their skills of turn-taking, and how to initiate and maintain social interactions.

As children develop their play skills with experience, it is important that we provide our children with play practice at all levels of play. Fostering skills in your children can foster creativity, problem-solving, initiative, social skills, and motor skills. Although each stage is different, below are some general suggestions when helping your child develop their play skills.

Suggestions:

- Have fun! This is what play is all about!
- Create a safe and comfortable environment for the child to play in
- Choose a time when the child is not tired or hungry, and is calm
- Express a playful attitude through tone of voice, volume, and body language
- Provide choice of toys or activities for the child to play with
 - For Infants – Toys that you and your baby can look at together and you can talk to them about. For example, rattles, mobiles, or playing with fingers and toes. Provide easy to hold toys, so that the child is able to grasp it while in different play positions.
 - Once your child is able to use their hands to manipulate toys – toys that your child can use and can make something happen versus just watch or listen to. For example, pop up toys, dropping objects into containers etc.
 - For a toddler – toys that they have more control over, such as blocks that stack versus a toy that makes a noise after pressing a button. Provide safe household items for playing, such as a plastic bowl and wooden spoon, boxes for emptying and filling, plastic cups for stacking etc.
- Expensive toys are not necessary. Household items (plastic bowl and wooden spoon), homemade toys (ragdoll), and art supplies from the dollar store are appropriate.
- Begin with familiar toys, objects, or people. With new objects or situations, model behaviour for your child first, so they have ideas on how to engage with the new items.

- Provide many types of age appropriate materials for the child to explore (i.e. water play, finger painting etc).
- Provide the child with opportunities for play in many environments with many different types of materials (i.e. finger painting on the back deck).
- For imaginary play, provide opportunities to dress up or use items in play (i.e. an old sweater and purse to dress up like “mommy”).
- Set up different stations in their play area, such as a kitchen area, a drama corner, a music corner, and an art corner.
- Find a balance between modeling or directing your child’s play and letting your child take the lead (example for young children: showing your child how to build a tower versus imitating your child by banging the blocks on the coffee table. Example for older children: ordering your food at the play kitchen and helping your child fix the meal versus following your child around the backyard on a quest for the dragon).
- Slowly take away the amount of assistance you provide your child to complete a play activity as they begin to master each of the skills.
- Encourage your child to come up with different ways they could solve the problem at hand. Find a different way to do a task.

**This sheet was created by the occupational therapists at the George Jeffrey Children’s Centre.
This sheet is not specific to your child, but provides general information.**