

Resource Article

The Stages of Play

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Children learn to roll, crawl, walk, and then run at different stages in their lives. In the same way, they go through stages of play. Knowing how this works will help you to better understand the children in your care.

Factors that Influence Children's Play

There are many things that can influence how and when children play. Included in this list are their past experiences, their temperaments and interests, and their ages. The availability of toys and games as well as places to play are other influences. Children play differently in groups than when alone, and the number of children and caregivers in the group also has an effect.

The Stages and Types of Play

Play matures as the child matures. The following information will help you know what types of play are important for children of different ages.

Discovery Play: Birth to 2 years

At this stage, the child is:

- Exploring and making sense of the environment
- Focusing on objects, sounds, smells, and sights
- Touching, mouthing, and observing

Play at this age does not involve the whole body.

Energetic Play: 2–3 years

At this stage, the child is involved in:

- Independent, adventurous play
- Interaction, speaking, and smiling
- Climbing, kicking, jumping, balancing, and running

Play at this age encourages independence and improves confidence. The child is using her whole body in play.

Creative and Make-Believe Play: 4 years and older

- At this stage, the child is:
- Developing early forms of social interaction
- Extending verbal skills
- Learning to take turns
- Involved in creative play, such as building things with blocks or sticks
- Having fun with make-believe play, such as pretending to be an adult
- Learning roles, such as what it means to be a male or female and what it means to be a teacher or shopkeeper

Problem-Solving Play: 5–6 years and older

At this stage, the child is:

- Learning to think about his actions
- Planning strategies
- Learning to solve new problems and learning through making mistakes

Social Play: 2–5 years and older

Sometimes people try to involve children in types of play that are inappropriate for the child's age level. For example, asking a group of 18-month-old children to play together will not work. The following list shows you the age at which children can engage in different types of play.

Solitary play: From birth to 2 years old, children play alone even if there are other children present.

Parallel play: From 2–3 years old, children play in the presence of each other but do not play together.

Associative play: From 3–4 years old, children play with similar objects but not together. They follow and talk to each other.

Cooperative play: From 4–5 years and older, children learn how to play together. They learn to socialize, take turns, and follow simple rules. They have an identified goal.

Ensuring the play needs of at-risk children is difficult. However, being aware of the stages and types of play is an important step in deciding when and where children can play.