



## The Art of PLAY! (And play skills)

### What is Play?

*"Life must be lived as play" – Plato*

*"Play is the highest form of research" – Albert Einstein*

Play is how we LEARN and interact with the world around us. It is often associated with children, however play occurs at any (and should occur during ALL) life stages, as well as among other higher-functioning animals. Meaningful play typically has key elements, including that play should be FUN, intrinsically motivating, freely chosen, and support active engagement. Play looks different for EVERYONE. As long as it is enjoyable and self-motivating for the person – it should be considered play. ALL and ANY kind of PLAY IS OK and should be allowed and encouraged! Play can look like lining up toys in rainbow order, playing a board game with friends, riding bikes, inspecting roof shingles on a dollhouse, and cooking in a pretend kitchen – all of these activities are examples of PLAY. During therapy, we may work on play skills in order to expand a child's engagement and joy, versus to remediate and/or get rid of play skills.

### Social Play vs. Play Skills

Play skills are typically broken up into two categories: social play skills and play skills. Often when working on specific play skills people will try to address both of these types of skills at the same time; however, it can be tricky for a child to work on both simultaneously. Both social play and play skills should be worked on in a DEVELOPMENTAL fashion, meaning that one stage must be mastered before the following stages can be addressed.

### **Social Play: How we INTERACT with others when we are playing**

Developmental stages of social play

- Solitary/Observer: play in which the child is playing alone or may be watching other people play
- Parallel Aware/Parallel Play: play in which two playmates engage in similar play activities in proximity to each other but are not sharing thoughts, play goals, or engaging in play together
- Turn Taking
- Social Interaction

*(Information adapted from: Meg Proctor, from Learn Play Thrive; <https://www.learnplaythrive.com>)*

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## **Play Skills: HOW we play**

Developmental stages of play skills

- Sensory Exploration (i.e., to see, hear, touch, etc. objects)
- Functional Toy Use (i.e., cause/effect toys, constructional play with toys)
- Pretend Play (i.e., playing with dolls, racing cars, creating a story, eating pretend food, pretending to drink, pretending to talk for stuffed animals, playing with pretend animals and acting them out, etc.)
- Symbolic Pretend Play (i.e., play utilizing objects, actions, or ideas to represent other objects, actions or ideas; for example using a banana as a telephone)
- Games With Rules

## **How to Work on Play!**

- Use a mastered skill to teach an emerging skill (i.e., use a mastered social play skill to teach an emerging play skill, and vice versa); for example, if a child has developed the ability to parallel play, but is not yet engaging in pretend play, utilize parallel play to TEACH pretend play (i.e., child has a doll, and you have a doll and model playing with the doll in a pretend fashion...)
- Remember that a kiddo will not be able to take turns, if they are not parallel playing or are not parallel aware of his/her playmate
- Utilize naturalistic strategies in order to help develop social play and play skills; these can include joining into the kiddos' world, imitating him/her, narrating what they are doing, etc.
- Teach imitation by structuring the activity and setting up materials in a way that speaks to the children, versus a way where the child has to look to you for instructions (this may mean including pictures that the child understands, utilizing objects to teach the task, etc.)
- Demonstrate what you want the child to do and utilize open-ended play
- Incorporate Loose Parts to help with imagination and symbolic pretend play (i.e., items that do not have a set or innate purpose and therefore can be used in many different ways when playing)
- Blend strategies when appropriate!

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