

PLAY



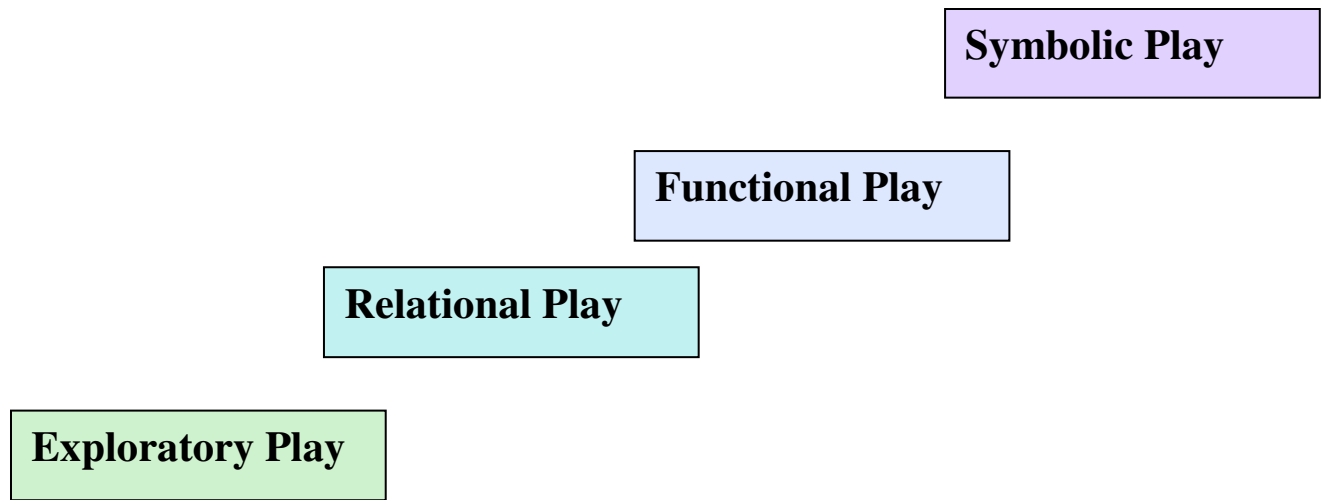
Why is play important?

Play refers to how children explore toys, put toys together, and begin to use imagination to act out roles and pretend. Play is a foundational skill for social and language development. Children learn through play. Play skills provide children with common interests they can talk about with an adult or peer. Research has shown that children who engage in pretend play will have more opportunities to successfully interact with peers and thus increase their own social skills.

For children with autism, intervention that improves play skills has also been shown to improve language skills. Thus, targeting play skills is particularly important for our children with autism who have difficulty learning how to play. Children with autism often learn some aspects of play (e.g., lining up cars; enacting parts of favorite T.V. shows). However, they may need support to attain a full-range of play skills and to be able to use those skills in a variety of situations.

How do play skills develop?

Children's play develops over 4 increasingly complex stages. Generally, these four different types of play are categorized in the following areas:



In the following sections, we will discuss each of these 4 levels of play, explaining each level and providing ideas for targeting these play skills with your child.

EXPLORATORY PLAY



What is Exploratory Play?

In exploratory play, children are examining and learning about the properties of toys through mouthing, banging, spinning, dropping, pushing, etc.

How can you work on your child's exploratory play?

Join in your child's exploratory play by rolling balls or modeling how to turn pages in a book or blow bubbles. Your child may need modeling and support to investigate new textures or toys. Provide a variety of different types of toys that make different sounds and have different textures and edges. Shiny toys can be very enticing, as can toys that have movement and noise. Provide opportunities for humor and surprise with the toys.

Once your child has shown some interest in exploring toys, you can begin teaching him/her how to start using 2 or more toys together in meaningful ways.

Recommended toys:

Balls, slinky, play-dough, bubbles, mechanical toys

RELATIONAL PLAY



What is Relational Play?

At this stage, your child starts to put objects together in his/her play. Examples of this kind of play are putting together puzzles, stacking blocks, removing and replacing lids on pots, lining up toys, or sorting (e.g., shapes, colors, or animals by category).

How can you work on relational play with your child?

You can model relational play for your child by constructing a block tower and knocking it down, putting objects together (e.g., stringing beads), and sorting shapes in a shape sorter.

Recommended toys:

Blocks, shape sorters, puzzles, toy pots and pans with lids

FUNCTIONAL PLAY



What is Functional Play?

Functional play is how children first learn to pretend. In this stage of play, children start to move beyond understanding how to use 2 toys together (e.g., stacking toys, putting toys in and out, placing a spoon in a toy cup) to some beginning pretend play with the toys (e.g., stirring the spoon in the cup, pretending to drink from a toy cup). Functional play involves using toys in the way they are meant to be used. Using toy phones to call someone and cooking with miniature pots and pans are examples of functional play.

How can you work on functional play with your child?

You can have fun modeling these early pretend skills for your child. For example, pretend to drink from a cup. Exaggerate sipping sounds and say “ahh” when you are finished sipping. When your child is able to imitate your pretend models, you can begin to add in more elements to the play over time. For example, you can pretend to eat with a spoon. You can also let your child feed you from a spoon or model for your child feeding a doll or toy animal.

Recommended Toys:

Dolls (including “action figures”), stuffed toys, toy plates, cups, spoons for pretend eating, housekeeping sets

SYMBOLIC PLAY



What is Symbolic Play?

Symbolic play refers to a high level of pretending that includes substituting one object for another (e.g., pretending a block is a car), pretending something has a property it does not have (e.g., pretending toy French fries are hot), or referring to something as if it were present (e.g., pretending there is tea in a toy teapot). Finally, role play, when a child pretends to be a teacher or firefighter, is another form of symbolic play.

How can you work on symbolic play with your child?

Pretend cooking activities are a great way to pretend with your child that a food is too hot or too cold or for substituting one object for another (e.g., a block for milk). You can substitute one object for another by such activities as pretending two chairs positioned side by side are the front seats of a car or the seats of an airplane, or that a large box is a house, a fort, or a cave. Role-playing games are another way to target symbolic play skills. For example, you can have your child act out a role from a favorite game or video. When your child is able to take one role, you can then increase the complexity by trading roles with your child (e.g., have your child play the 'bad' monster instead of the 'good' monster). Role play is also a good opportunity to model problem-solving skills.

For example, you and your child can talk about how to make a ‘mean’ alligator into a ‘nice’ one (i.e., what could the alligator do to change?).

Don't be afraid to have fun and be silly with your child during symbolic play. For example, changing your voice when you read or putting on a hat or funny nose can help a young child learn and practice humor.

Recommended Toys:

Toy plates, cups, spoons, dolls, dress up clothes, materials for forts, a playhouse, tool chest, books