

Tip Sheets

The Stages of Play

As children grow and develop, the types of play in which they engage also grow and develop. It is



important to keep in mind that although certain types of play tend to be associated with certain ages, these types of play are not restricted to these age groups.

For example, solitary play

tends to first begin to appear between three and eighteen months of age but older children may engage in solitary play at various times and for a variety of reasons. The following are different types of play:

Unoccupied Play

Unoccupied play begins with random movements that really have no clear purpose or goal. This is the beginning of play and generally takes place from birth to three months of age.

Solitary Play

Solitary play generally develops between three and eighteen months of age and involves a child watching and exploring the world alone or independently. This type of play is important for many children who are older as a time to relax or decompress.

Onlooker Play

Usually seen in the toddler years when children are learning language and how to relate to others or when a child is unsure of how to enter into play interactions with others. This type of play is

characterized by a child watching another child or group of children play.

Parallel Play

Children begin to play alongside their peers between the ages of 18 months and 2 years of age. This type of play helps children to learn about property rights such as “mine” and also provides opportunities to begin to introduce children to simple dress-up and pretend play. For example, an early care and education professional may choose to sit down with a container of different types of hats and encourage children to try them on.

Associative Play

When children reach 3 to 4 years of age they become much more interested in other children than in toys, and they begin to play together, although the activities are not extremely coordinated. This type of play helps children to learn how to get along with one another and to share equipment/materials.

Cooperate Play

In the later preschool years, children begin to play more cooperatively and organize their play with each other around group goals. There is generally one leader. This type of play would involve games with rules that helps children to learn how to be a member of a team, compromise, and negotiate.

Additional Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics

<https://www.aap.org>

National Association for the Education of Young
Children

<http://www.naeyc.org>

The Power of Play

<http://www.childrensmuseums.org/images/MCMResearchSummary.pdf>

Zero to Three

<https://www.zerotothree.org>

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