

Play Skills

What is play?



Play is voluntary engagement in self motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment. Play may consist of amusing, pretend or imaginary, constructive, interpersonal (play with others) or intrapersonal (solitary play) interactions. Play is the way that children learn about the environment, their bodies and their place in the world around them.

Play is often thought to be frivolous in nature, but can in fact be very structured or very specific in its goal (e.g. defined games such as sports or computer games). Play skills are determined by the ability to plan and sequence play activities (including new activities), problem solve challenges and generalise skills from one activity/toy to another.

Why is play important?

Play is one way by which children learn. “Free” or unstructured play in early childhood is an important way that children learn about their world. Play is also an avenue through which social skills can develop. As they grow older, children learn about societal rules by making up games with rules, as well as about winning and losing and ‘playing fair’. They also learn about controlling their impulses in order to do well at something and about space, negotiating and problem solving. Above all, play is needed for fun and relaxation.

What are the building blocks necessary to develop play?

- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task or activity performance to achieve a well-defined result.
- **Executive functioning:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Body awareness:** Knowing where your limbs are in space and how to move them in relation to the body and environment. In typical learners this is an ‘automatic’ knowledge that makes learning easy.
- **Problem solving:** The identification of a challenge, including *what* the challenge is, *what strategies* could be used to overcome it, and the subsequent *performance* to overcome it.
- **Social skills:** Determined by the ability to engage in reciprocal interaction with others (either verbally or non-verbally), to compromise with others, and to be able to recognise and follow social norms.
- **Receptive** (understanding) **language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Expressive** (using) **language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Self regulation:** The ability to obtain, maintain and change one’s emotion, behaviour, attention and activity level appropriate for a task or situation in a socially acceptable manner).

How can you tell if my child has problems with play?

If a child has difficulties with play they might:

- Have difficulty playing independently and constantly demand adult attention.
- Flit between multiple activities without completing them (or actively engaging in them).
- Lack knowledge of how to occupy their time or entertain themselves.
- Have few friends or has difficulty making friends.
- Require adult assistance to problem solve.
- Enjoy playing alone and prefers others not to be involved.
- Engage in limited or very repetitive activities (e.g. only likes running around outside, pushes the train backwards and forwards along only one part of the track).
- Not play appropriately with toys and instead prefers to just tip them out of the box or throw them around the room.
- Avoid eye contact.
- Be unable to initiate play themselves, and instead are reliant upon others to set up play for them.
- Not engage in turn taking games (e.g. rolling a ball to and fro or taking turns building a tower).
- Seem fixated on the television or computer to the extent that they will not engage in anything else.

What other problems can occur when a child has play difficulties?

When a child has play difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- **Emotional development/regulation:** which involves the ability to perceive emotion, integrate emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotions and to regulate emotions.
- **Social skills:** Determined by the ability to engage in reciprocal interaction with others (either verbally or non-verbally), to compromise with others, and be able to recognize and follow social norms.
- **Pragmatics:** The way language is used within social situations.
- **Receptive (understanding) language:** Comprehension of language.
- **Expressive (using) language:** The use of language through speech, sign or alternative forms of communication to communicate wants, needs, thoughts and ideas.
- **Planning and sequencing:** The sequential multi-step task or activity

performance to achieve a well-defined result.

- **Pre-language skills:** The ways in which we communicate without using words and include things such as gestures, facial expressions, imitation, joint attention and eye-contact.
- **Sensory processing:** Accurate registration, interpretation and response to sensory stimulation in the environment and one's own body.
- **Shifting** between activities.
- **Self regulation:** The ability to obtain, maintain and change one's emotion, behaviour, attention and activity level appropriate for a task or situation in a socially acceptable manner.
- **Behaviour:** The child's actions, usually in relation to their environment.
- **Executive functioning:** Higher order reasoning and thinking skills.
- **Working memory:** The ability to temporarily retain and manipulate information involved in language comprehension, reasoning, and learning new information; and to update this information as change occurs.

What can be done to improve play skills?

- **One-on-one time:** Create opportunities for yourself and the child to play together (e.g. before dinner, at the end of each day) and complete activities that are fun and that the child finds enjoyable.
- **Peer interaction:** Create opportunities for the child to engage with other children in structured situations (e.g. play group) and social environments (e.g. playground).
- **Play dates:** Set up opportunities for the child to have friends over and to go to other people's houses to learn more about sharing and interacting in different environments.
- **Scripts:** Create scripts that the child can copy whilst playing with toys (e.g. "Here comes the train. The dog gets on the train. The dog gets off the train. Here comes the train again. The cat gets on the train. The cat gets off the train"). This helps the child to learn how to use language in play and to plan and sequence actions within a play activity.

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What activities can help improve play?

- **Experiment:** Find out through experimentation what types of fun activities and games the child enjoys.
- **Engage** regularly in play activities with the child.
- **Enjoyment:** Choose play activities that the child will find fun.
- **Model** and show the child new and different things to do with a toy.
- **Follow the child's lead** and copy what they do with a toy (i.e. don't be limited by what adults perceive should be done with a toy).
- **Different locations:** Play in different places (e.g. on the floor, at the table, outside on the grass).
- **Face-to-face:** Make sure you are face-to-face with the child while playing so your child has better opportunities to imitate/copy you.
- **Board games:** For the older child engage regularly in board games (e.g. Snakes and Ladders, Guess Who). This will help to teach the child how to play these types of games with other children and teach them that it's alright to not always be the winner.
- **Develop stories** as you play and ensure play is directed by the child.

Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with play in my child?

Therapeutic intervention to help a child with play difficulties is important to:

- Improve the child's ability to interact and play with peers.
- Encourage the child to engage positively with other children at school and when visiting places, such as the park or swimming pool.
- Develop problem solving skills.
- Help the child to develop better receptive and expressive language skills.
- Help the child to engage and complete activities at school that involve peer interactions (e.g. group project, playing sport).
- Help the child to learn about different activities/scenarios within the community (e.g. playing shopping can model to a child how to select food, take it to the cashier and then pay for the items).

If left untreated what can difficulties with play lead to?

When children have difficulties with play, they might also have difficulties with:

- Making new friends.
- Maintaining friendships with peers.
- Completing higher education tasks that involve working with others.
- Completing tasks at work that involve liaising with colleagues.
- Prioritising information and problem solving challenges.

What type of therapy is recommended for play difficulties?

If your child has difficulties with play, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist or Speech Therapist.

The most appropriate professional will be dependent upon what other issues are occurring at the time. In many instances, it is better for the child to see both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense which provides both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

