

# Introducing It: The Importance of Play in Early Childhood

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*This tip sheet will discuss the function of play in children's development.*

## WHAT IS PLAY?

While the value adults place on play varies across cultures, children naturally fill much of their free time playing. What children play varies, too, but children across the world frequently play in similar ways,<sup>1</sup> including:

1. pretending/practicing adult roles (e.g., cleaning house, taking care of children, being a teacher or doctor, etc.);
2. physical play including games or sports; and
3. creative or artistic play

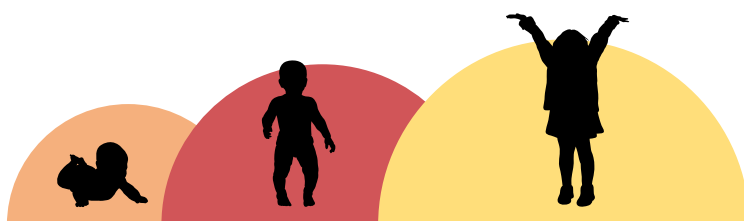
It's easy to know play when you see it, but have you ever really thought about what defines an activity as play? Child development researchers have identified a few key components of play.<sup>2</sup> Play is:

- directed by the child
- done for its own sake

Play has a very broad definition, and can include a lot of different types of activities!

## PLAY LOOKS DIFFERENT AS CHILDREN GROW

Here are some types of play that children engage in throughout early childhood and some reasons why they are important for development:<sup>2</sup>



**0+ Years**

Sensorimotor and Practice Play

**1+ Years**

Parallel and Social Play and Pretend Play

**2+ Years**

Constructive Play and Games

**“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning.”**

**-Fred Rogers<sup>3</sup>**



**with children 0+ years old**

## SENSORIMOTOR & PRACTICE PLAY

This type of play is centered around objects and can include shaking rattles, stacking cups, kicking a ball, or climbing up and down a slide. This play develops fine and gross motor skills; improves strength, balance, and body awareness; and leads to an understanding of cause and effect (e.g., what happens when objects are dropped or pushed). Infants are driven to explore their environment through multiple senses (including putting everything in their mouth), and will often repeat the same motion again and again. They are brilliant little scientists who will try the same experiment over and over again just to make sure they get the same results!

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with children 1+ years old

## PARALLEL AND SOCIAL PLAY

Infants and toddlers are interested in what other children are doing. They may copy what someone else is doing or companionably use toys together—known as **parallel play**. As children grow, **social play** becomes more common, where multiple children cooperate to work together toward a goal (building a road, sustaining a pretend world). Social play is crucial for building social skills such as emotional regulation, negotiation and compromise, and standing up for oneself.

## PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play begins very simply with the symbolic use of objects, for example, using a toy banana as a telephone. As children grow, pretend play can develop into elaborate dramatic storytelling, with multiple characters who each play a part and a story with some amount of plot. Children stretch their imaginations and practice important cognitive skills in this kind of play.

The act of engaging in pretend relies on **executive function**. Executive function refers to brain-based skills that include everything from task switching to impulse control.<sup>4</sup> Using an object to represent something else—like that banana phone—is an executive function milestone. It's a key precursor to the kind of symbolic thinking needed to understand letters and numbers.

The concept of *psychological distancing* captures the idea that children are better able to use executive function skills when they have some distance from the situation. That could include making a choice for someone else rather than for themselves or pretending to be someone else while making a choice. Researchers have found that when children

are pretending to be someone competent (e.g., a superhero), they are able to show greater persistence on a task.<sup>5</sup>

Pretend play can also support children's mental health and social-emotional development. Play scenarios around fears or anxieties allow children to be more "in charge" of the situation, gain extra repetition and practice, and share situations that involve big feelings in a way that feels safer and less overwhelming.

**"In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself."**

**-Lev Vygotsky<sup>6</sup>**



with children 2+ years old

## CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY

Constructive play centers around building things: block towers, Lego® creations, forts, arts and crafts. Constructive play can build fine motor skills, concentration, and perseverance through frustration.

## GAMES

Games involve activities with specific agreed upon rules—tag, the floor is lava, go fish, Candy Land™. This type of structured play includes opportunities to practice skills such as taking turns, following rules, and regulating emotions around competition.

## DEFINING IT

### Play

Activities that are self-directed and done for their own sake, just because they're fun.

### Executive function

A set of brain-based skills that allow people to control their own behavior and direct it towards longer-term goals rather than doing what is automatic or easiest.

### Psychological distancing

People can more competently use their executive function skills when they have some distance from the problem at hand, for example when making a decision for someone else, or pretending to be someone else.<sup>5</sup>

## DIVING INTO IT

### For additional information on this topic:

To learn more about executive function, check out our tip sheets:

[z.umn.edu/executive-function](https://z.umn.edu/executive-function)

For more on the power of pretend play, check out our blog post, "Do Grown-ups Play Pretend?"

[ceed.umn.edu/do-grown-ups-play-pretend](https://ceed.umn.edu/do-grown-ups-play-pretend)

The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report on The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds:

[z.umn.edu/importance\\_play](https://z.umn.edu/importance_play)

Please visit CEED's website: [ceed.umn.edu](https://ceed.umn.edu)

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<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1138861.pdf>

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