

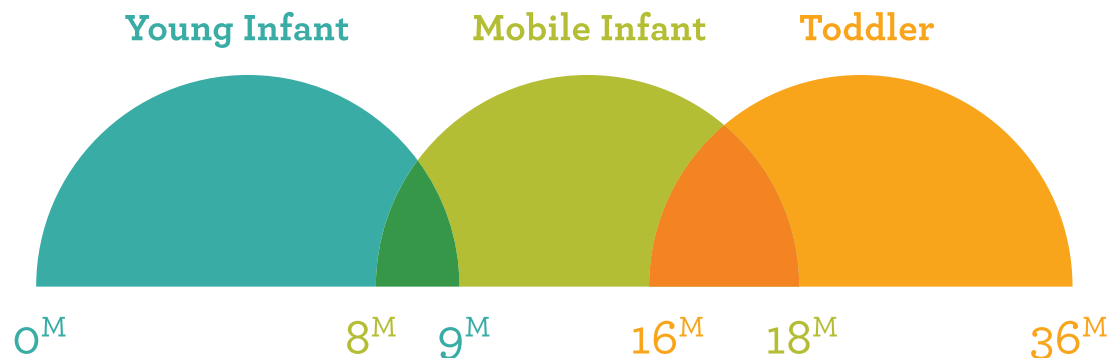
# 1

## The Importance of Play for Young Children



When we appreciate the important role play serves in a child's learning about self and world, we give children the time and opportunity to engage in the self-initiated play that is the surest way for them to fully realize all of their intellectual, emotional, and social potential.

—David Elkind, *The Wisdom of Play: How Children Learn to Make Sense of the World*



While infant and toddler play may not look like the play of older children, this is where play begins. The foundations of play are in the early relationships that a newborn forms with the people and the world around her. For example, the responses she receives from her first social smiles support later, more complex interactions with you and with others in her world. These interactions, which are the beginning of play behavior, may be harder to recognize as play than the more typical activity of preschoolers.

When a very young child is playing, it may look random, unstructured, or like nothing much is happening. For example, a toddler walking on a wet street may stomp in each puddle, staring at the splashes that result and then stomping some more. When you observe closely, you see that this child is busy at play—and learning. He is experimenting with cause and effect (I can make the water splash with my feet!), making comparisons (stomp harder, make bigger splashes), and noticing different sensations on his skin (dry vs. wet). Through play like this, young children are actually learning basic principles of science and math (Cohen & Emmons 2017).

Here are some more examples of what play looks like at very young ages:

### **Play at 6, 15, 24, and 30 months**

Tomas (6 months) is on his tummy, a basket of wooden and plastic rattles in front of him. His eyes and mouth are both open wide. He squeals, then reaches out and grasps a bright orange ridged rattle. He brings it to his mouth, turning his wrist and mouthing the surface until the handle reaches his lips. He rubs the handle against his mouth, then drops the rattle. He reaches out to repeat the process with a second rattle, a wooden one. Each rattle has a unique color and texture, and Tomas is beginning to learn about these characteristics as he mouths them. Although this exploration is slow and the learning is subtle, Tomas's teacher lets him mouth several different ones and does not interrupt his play or try to show him something new by shaking the rattles. She talks to him about the different textures he's experiencing.

Jurnee (15 months) is exploring a three-piece puzzle. She lifts two pieces, but rather than put them back in their holes, she bangs them together like a pair of cymbals. Then she tries to fit one into her mouth. No luck. She abandons the pieces and toddles away. Although Jurnee's teacher might choose another moment to coach Jurnee to put the pieces in the holes, in this moment he realizes that Jurnee is learning about the puzzle pieces in her own way and that this gathering of knowledge is valid too.

East (24 months) is cradling a plastic baby doll in his arms. He rocks it back and forth, then places it on the couch. Walking to the corner of the house area, he picks up a blanket, carries it back to the doll, and gently covers the doll, leaving the face showing. He kisses the face, then turns to reach for a small clipboard and pencil.

East is showing his teacher that he has observed and can imitate the care he sees given to his small cousin at home. His teacher, knowing that having a new baby in the family is a significant life change for little ones, has provided East with both the space for “talking about” his life through play and the props to do so.

At a family child care center, children are watching a show outdoors about bees. Sarah (30 months) is focused on the piles of oak pollen and dust on the ground. She looks over and sees an older child drawing in the dust with a stick and imitates him, using a small stick to trace ovals in the dust. Next she makes piles of twigs. She notices tiny acorns in the piles and extends them to her teacher, asking if something so small can be an acorn.

Sarah’s teacher does not try to refocus her attention on the bee show that the older children are enjoying. She knows that Sarah is learning about the properties of the dust, refining her motor skills as she writes and picks up items, learning math as she sorts and labels the acorns and reflects on their size, and engaging in parallel play (imitating and playing with materials in a similar way as another child nearby but not influencing or being influenced by the other child).

**All these children are learning in the way young children learn best: not through adult direction or being coached to use a material in a certain way, but by making their own choices from carefully selected toys and materials and exploring them under the watchful eye of an adult who knows them well. The children are eagerly researching the world and how it works, in their own ways. Their teachers are aware of the children’s interests and capabilities, the learning that may be occurring through play, and when it’s best to step in or just observe.**

### **This book uses the following general age ranges for infants and toddlers:**

Young infant: 0–9 months

Mobile infant: 8–18 months

Toddler: 16–36 months

From “DAP with Infants and Toddlers, Ages Birth–3,” NAEYC. [NAEYC.org/resources/topics/dap/infants-and-toddlers](https://naeyc.org/resources/topics/dap/infants-and-toddlers).

# What Is Play and What Does It Mean for Infants and Toddlers?

Like play itself, the many definitions of play are varied. Psychologist Peter Gray (2008) notes several widely recognized characteristics of play:

- › Play is something chosen by the players, an activity they engage in just for its own sake.
- › The players determine the content of the play, including the structure and rules.
- › Players are free to stop anytime, and they're engaged in the activity but are not stressed by it.
- › Because play is shaped by the imagination, it follows different rules than those found in real life.

Through play, children learn to persist, interact, engage, invent, and act out their ideas and share them. Play affirms and stimulates children's creativity and nurtures the "thinking outside the box" approach that children will use to contribute their own ideas to the world. As Piaget notes, "Play is the answer to the question: how does anything new come about?" (quoted in Elkind 2008, 3).

As children engage in self-led, open-ended play with you and by themselves, they are building the foundations of later learning (Petersen 2012). They are also gaining social skills (Ramani 2012) and learning to work well with others—important for the classroom, home, and eventual school success.

## Types of Play

Understanding some of the different ways that very young children play can help you support them where they're at and gently introduce more complex interactions and exploration. Here are some common types of play you'll see infants and toddlers engaging in (Kid Sense, n.d.; White, n.d.; Yogman et al. 2018).

**Interpersonal play.** Social and emotional exchanges between infants and peers or teachers are a basic form of play. Through play with others, infants use

teachers as secure bases for exploring their environment. These interactions help infants develop a sense of self. Examples: peekaboo and cooing back and forth.

### **Exploratory or sensorimotor play.**

Children explore objects to understand what they are and what can be done with them. Examples: banging, mouthing, shaking, or handling and throwing objects or materials.

## Play Is Essential to Children’s Development

Long before they develop the ability to use language to ask questions about the world around them, young children investigate it using their senses. They look, hear, taste, smell, touch, and move, exploring and discovering at their own pace to expand what they know and understand.

**Gaining skills and knowledge.** Play supports children’s skills across all developmental domains: social and emotional, language (Ramani 2012), cognitive, self-help, and large and small motor (Bongiorno 2019). By actively exploring objects and people, infants and toddlers discover things like the following (Piaget, quoted in Maguire-Fong 2015):

- › The properties or characteristics of objects, such as soft, heavy, slippery, cold
- › The relationship between objects, such as size, order, number, and pattern; cause and effect; and the experience of time
- › The language and behaviors we use to communicate with and understand each other and the world

Play is the vehicle for helping children make progress toward the learning goals you have for them. It builds skills they’ll use throughout their lives, such as solving problems, interacting and negotiating with others, processing emotions, taking risks, flexibility, resilience, and self-direction (Pathways.org 2019).

**A way to practice.** Play is also a way for children to prepare for adult tasks. When a toddler imitates your diapering routines, his play may look routine and unimportant. But it allows him to accomplish a couple of things: master the world he inhabits now and build the confidence and skills he will need to approach new challenges as he encounters them.

**Relational play.** Children explore how objects can be combined in play, often imitating the use of objects they have observed. Examples: using a pitcher to pour juice or a spoon to stir in a cup.

**Constructive play.** Children use open-ended materials—blocks, sand, paint—to create something. They are able to think about something before they try to construct it. Examples: stacking several blocks or problem solving how to extract a stuck ball from a tube.

**Symbolic play.** Also known as dramatic or pretend play, this type of play involves using one object as another object, idea, or action. Older toddlers may act out simple story lines that involve several players. Example: using sand as food in a pretend kitchen, taking on roles in the kitchen.

**Rough-and-tumble play.** This form of play occurs at all ages and is characterized by engaging in playful physical actions. Examples: crawling over other infants, pulling opposite each other on a length of fabric.

**Regulating emotions and actions.** Right along with learning how to move and talk and make things happen, infants and toddlers are gradually learning to focus their attention, control their impulses, make decisions, manage strong feelings, resist their urges to push or grab to get what they want right now, and negotiate play rules. Play is an excellent way for them to practice these complex self-regulation skills because the pleasure of playing with others motivates children to develop them (Galinsky 2010). For example, while playing, toddlers gradually learn—with lots of support from you!—ways to resolve conflicts over toys or play plans in ways that work for all the players.

## Electronic Toys and Screen Devices

Many toys for very young children feature flashing lights, noises, and music. Be aware that these toys can be overstimulating for very young children and can contribute to making the classroom loud and chaotic.

Videos and cell phone apps are sometimes marketed as tools that make babies smarter. However, having face-to-face interactions with infants and toddlers makes you a far more effective play and learning partner than screens or devices. When you speak, sing, and smile in response to a child, you're showing her how relationships work—something she doesn't learn from a toy or screen. These interactions allow children to try out and refine their communication and language skills and to receive a smile that says that they are valued and loved and that their ideas are exciting and worth exploring. Throughout this book you'll find suggestions for materials and activities that are more appropriate choices for supporting the development of infants and toddlers than most electronic toys and devices.

## Play Helps Children Handle Stress and Conflict

When challenges or stresses arise during play—a ball won't fit into a hole, there aren't enough shovels for all the players, the "blanket" a child made from a leaf tore apart—children gradually learn to handle the stressful, unpleasant, or challenging situations and to solve the problem rather than respond with an outburst of emotion or simply stop playing. Through play, children learn how to approach challenges in a constructive way, as Ansel and Frida are doing:

### Smoothing over a spoon dispute with a 26- and 27-month-old

Ansel (27 months) and Frida (26 months) are standing in front of a plastic baby doll in the sand kitchen, a pretend kitchen with real running water for symbolic play. "Dere's two spoons—one for you and one for me," Ansel says as he places two small plastic spoons in a bowl and walks to the stack of plates. Frida takes both small spoons, using them like salad tongs to scoop up sand and put it in a bowl. Their teacher comments,

“Oh, Ansel is setting the table and you are making the food, Frida.” “It’s pasta!” trumpets Frida. “It’s tasty!” “And Ansel is getting a serving spoon. It’s big,” comments the teacher as Ansel picks up a large spoon.

She continues to narrate: “Frida is serving with two spoons.” Ansel looks over at the bowl and sees that both spoons are gone. He frowns and looks at Frida. “But I need a small spoon too,” he says loudly. Frida grins and hands him a spoon, and they both smile. Together they serve the sand pasta onto the plates.

In his role as the server, Ansel demonstrates more patience with the plan change around the spoons than his teacher has seen him do in other situations. He is able to relax into the game and serve the food rather than remain irritated that Frida has ignored his initial cue about sharing the spoons (“one for you and one for me”). The skillful narration of their teacher helps both children see each other’s play bids—their attempts to engage each other and share their own points of view—and keeps the game running smoothly.

## Play Helps Children Focus

As children play, they develop the ability to concentrate for longer and longer periods of time (Wang & Barrett 2013). A very young infant may focus just a moment or two on your playful face. An older infant may be able to focus long enough to track several balls as they travel down a ball drop and under a shelf, and a toddler may be able to complete a nine-piece knob puzzle. This active, focused engagement with a challenging task—often called a *state of flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 2014)—is something children learn to cultivate through their play. It will continue to be important as they enter more complex and challenging learning environments. You encourage children to persist in trying things when you make comments and suggestions as they play, expand on their language or actions, and change up an activity or make it a little more complex.

Mom: What is play?

Miles (30 months): Ummm, Mommy?

Mom: How do you know if you're playing?

Miles: My friends are there.

## Play Supports Creativity

Children develop creative thinking skills when they explore and problem solve during play. For example, when young children are shown how a toy works, they often use the toy only in the way it was demonstrated and then discard it. But when children are asked to find out for themselves how a toy works, they focus on the task longer and discover new or more effective ways to use it (Bonawitz et al. 2011). While it's important for you to interact with children as they play and to respond to their cues, they will learn more and be more engaged if you direct their play less and look for ways to support their own ideas. Chapters 2–4 offer many practical strategies for doing this.

As children engage in play experiences with others, they begin to be able to resist the impulse to take play materials—and hang on to them so no one else can get them! Instead, they learn to consider alternatives that might be more creative or innovative or reflect the needs and interests of other children. This process takes many years, but through social play, young children build the confidence to figure things out and trust their own creative solutions to life's challenges (Berk & Meyers 2013).

## Why Do Adults Need to Facilitate Infants' and Toddlers' Play?

Children will learn through play even if they do not experience the kind of mindful teacher support described throughout this book. Why, then, does it matter what a teacher does with infants and toddlers as they play?

### You Expand Learning Opportunities

If you provide well-timed, tuned-in feedback and gentle task support, you can *scaffold* a child's learning—guide her to learn and accomplish something she can't do by herself right now. By describing the ongoing action, asking open-ended questions, coaching interactions, and providing materials when a child needs them, you expand the learning possibilities of any play scenario.

Tuning in to a child's needs and ideas and joining her as she explores materials allows you to

- › Expand the child's vocabulary by labeling her actions and toys during play
- › Support her social skills by inviting her to take turns with you and with peers and working through disputes
- › Expand the play and encourage more complex thinking by giving her hints for a new play idea or technique or by making connections to things in her life
- › Promote persistence by guiding the child to a solution when things get hard—expressing how hard or frustrating it is when tasks go awry and then gently helping her refocus on the task



## Scaffolding with an 18- and 19-month-old

Teacher Nathan is seated with Miriam (18 months). From a basket of brightly colored teething necklaces, Miriam chooses one. She presses it to her head, then frowns. Nathan comments, “It looks like you want to put that necklace on over your head. You look frustrated. That looks hard.” Miriam looks at him. “Your mama was wearing a necklace,” Nathan continues. “I wonder if she opened it up before she put it over her head. Maybe she used both hands?” Miriam hands him the necklace. He opens it with both hands and puts it over his head, then hands her a second necklace. With a wrinkled forehead, Miriam grasps the necklace and opens it as Nathan has modeled, then places it over her own head. She grins. “You did it!” Nathan cheers. “Now we are both wearing necklaces!” Kaleo (19 months) walks over, his eyes on Miriam’s necklace. “Hi, Kaleo,” Nathan says. “Miriam and I are wearing necklaces! Want to use mine?” He takes his off, modeling taking turns with materials, and Kaleo grins and takes it.

## You Help Children Recognize and Handle Their Emotions

As you observe the challenges children have as they play, offer comments about what you see and hear and help them find some satisfying resolutions. By doing this, you enable children to process and handle their emotions. When you observe a toddler repeatedly diapering a doll, for example, you can affirm how hard it is to have a new baby sibling and how the toddler is such a good big brother.

When you hear a toddler demand that the doll stay in one bed while he is in another bed, you can comment that the doll must have a new big kid bed now. This creates space for the child to express his feelings to a supportive person—you.

## What Does It Mean to Facilitate Young Children’s Play?

For infants and toddlers to fully experience the benefits of play and interaction with others, they depend on you to do several things: provide a sense of safety and security, offer just the right kind and amount of stimulation and support at the right times, be relaxed and playful, and meet their individual needs.

### Provide a Secure Base

Infant and toddler play happens in the context of a *secure base*—a person the child trusts and can turn to when he’s anxious or upset. A secure base acts as both a safe place for a child to *be* and a place for her to recharge before she goes back out to explore the world.