

While play is often seen as something frivolous that children do to pass the time, play is an incredibly important part of a child's healthy development. Play is children's work. Through play, children learn academic skills like math, science, reading, language and literacy. They learn social skills like effective communication, conflict resolution, problem solving and cooperation. Maybe most importantly, they learn about themselves – they get to know their personalities including their likes and dislikes, strengths and interests. Through play, children learn where they fit in in the world.

What would think if you saw....

...a child who was playing on their own and ignoring all the other children around them?

...a child sitting off to the side of a group of children watching them play?

Discuss

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SOCIAL STAGES OF PLAY

Unoccupied Play



The random movements that Infants make with no clear purpose is the beginning of play.

Solitary Play



When children start to play on their own. Children do not seem to notice other children sitting or playing nearby during this type of play

Onlooker Play



When children watch others play. The child who is looking may ask questions but there is no effort to join the play.

Parallel Play



When children begins to play side-by-side with other children without any interaction. They are paying attention to each other.

Associative Play



When children start asking questions of each other. They have similar goals but there are no set rules.

Social Play



When children begin to share ideas and toys, and follow established rules and guidelines.

Children are relatively still and their play appears scattered.

This type of play builds the foundation for the other five stages of play.

Unoccupied play looks like babies or young children exploring materials around them without any sort of organisation.

Unoccupied Play



This stage allows children to practice manipulating materials, mastering their self-control and learning about how the world works.

This type of play occurs when children entertain themselves without any other social involvement.

Adults might worry about children playing alone, but actually solitary play is very normal.

Solitary Play



Children in solitary play may not notice or acknowledge other children.

When children engage in solitary play, they are able to explore freely, master new personal skills like new motor or cognitive skills, and prepare themselves to play with others.

Children who sit back and engagingly watch other children playing, but do not join in are onlookers.

The active part
of their play is
watching others.

Onlooker Play



Just as adults “people watch”
at the coffee shop, children learn
a lot by watching others.

They learn about the social rules of play
and relationships, they explore different
ways of playing or using materials and
they learn about the world in general.

Sometimes it's easy to
think children engaged in
onlooker play might be
lonely or scared to engage
with other children, when
in fact it is a very normal
part of play development.

This occurs when children play next to each other, but are not really interacting together.

Parallel Play



For example, two children may drive cars on the carpet next to each other, but their play does not actually overlap.

In this stage, children are not really engaging in a social exchange.

Think of this stage like a warm up exercise children work side by side on the same activity, practicing skills and learning new methods to engage together.

This type of play signifies a shift in the child.

Instead of being more focused on the activity or object involved in play, children begin to be more interested in the other players.

Associative play allows children to begin practicing what they have observed through onlooker and parallel play.

They can start to use their new found social skills to engage with other children or adults during an activity or exploration.

Associative Play



This is play categorised by cooperative efforts between players.

Children might adopt group goals, establish rules for play.

It's important to remember cooperation is an advanced skill and can be very difficult for young children.

Ironically, cooperative play often involves a lot of conflict. This is normal.

It is sometimes difficult for young children to share, take turns and negotiate control in these types of play scenarios.



You can support children engaged in cooperative play by staying close and helping them learn healthy expression of emotions and teach them problem solving skills.