

Understanding Play Development



Children move through different stages of play as they grow. Sharing, turn-taking and joining in progress over time. Understanding a child's current stage of play can help adults support the next steps in their development.

1

Unoccupied play

Moves, explores and watches what is around them.



Typical in infancy

2

Solitary play

Plays alone and is focused on their own activity.



Common: birth–2 years

3

Onlooker play

Watches other children play, but does not join in yet.



Common: around 2 years+

4

Parallel play

Plays alongside other children, often with similar toys, but not truly together.



Common: 2–3 years

5

Associative play

Starts to interact, share materials and talk during play.



Common: 3–4 years

6

Cooperative play

Plays with others towards a shared idea or goal.



Common: 4+ years



Key message

- ✓ Sharing is a developmental skill.
- ✓ Young children are often not ready to share on demand.
- ✓ Playing near others usually comes before playing with others.
- ✓ Support, modelling and time help these skills grow.



Supporting Play Development

- ✓ Model turn-taking
- ✓ Use simple language: 'my turn, your turn'
- ✓ Join the child at their current stage of play
- ✓ Build towards the next stage through play

These stages are based on typical development. Children with developmental differences, trauma histories and/or diagnoses may progress more slowly, differently, or move between stages in their own way.



Ages are guides, not rules. Children develop at different rates.

