

Three Stages of Developmental Play

An expert guide to toddler development for healthcare professionals

Healthcare professionals have an important part in helping parents of toddlers (1-3 years) learn how significant play is for development and reasoning.

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Key Learnings

1. Play serves a serious function.

Play has an important role in cognitive and creative development as well as being about fun and establishing connections.

2. Sensory, Projective and Role Play are all different.

These three distinct stages of developmental play have distinctive, unique characteristics.

3. Advocate presence over presents.

Toddlers don't need lots of props to play with. Parents should ensure toys are carefully selected rather than randomly collected.

Taking developmental play seriously!

Children develop their understanding of who they are, and who the people and the world around them are, through developmental play. It is how they learn where 'I' ends and the world outside them begins.

Research has demonstrated that parents who talk to their children regularly explaining features about nature and social issues, or who read or tell stories at bedtime are more likely to foster pretend play.¹

This is the seriousness of play. It is important that parents learn to play with their children. Parents who are comfortable communicating at the child's developmental level can use play to connect with them and support their development.

Three Stages of Developmental Play: Sensory Play, Projective Play and Role Play.

Understanding the stages of play also allows us to better identify any gaps in development. Play can be used as part of an assessment and/or diagnostic process: for example, a five year old who is not engaging in any projective play will need additional support, and there may well be associated behavioural challenges that correlate with this gap.

Play is the language of children. Professionals working with parents and families can use this 'language' to connect and communicate. It's important to be comfortable with playing and using playful engagement.

Stage 1: Sensory Play

What it is

This first stage, from birth to age three-and-a-half or four, is essential to developing a sense of trust. Babies learn to trust in a physical way, not through words. This is a very sensory stage of play, in which touch plays a vital role. It is about learning and integrating that sense of having a body and skin. The toddler learns that they have a body, what it can do, and where it ends. It is about containment.

Examples of Sensory Play

Suggest to parents that they play games such as peek-a-boo and making objects disappear and then re-appear (quickly). This allows their toddler to accept that objects (and later people) still exist even when they can't see them, and that they will return. A pot and a wooden spoon is a perfectly effective instrument, as are dried peas in a Pringles tube with the lid taped on.

Stage 2: Projective Play

What it is

Between age four and five-and-a-half, there is increased focus on stories and narrations.

Children at this age are responding to the world outside of the body. They want to further explore and investigate objects, people and their general environment at a deeper level.

Examples of Projective Play

When children use toys to introduce possible scenarios or friends, the representation of multiple perspectives occurs naturally. Taking on different roles allows children the unique opportunity to learn social skills such as communication, problem solving, and empathy. Play with puppets, dolls, cars (and anything else they can talk to and use to interact with each other to play out scenarios) is effective here.

Stage 3: Role Play

What it is

From five-and-a-half to age seven, children engage in dramatic play. This serves to help them re-structure/re-arrange aspects of their life events to gain a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. Aspects of Embodiment and Projective Play are evident in this final stage.

Examples of Role Play

Play such as 'Doctors & Nurses' and 'Mummies & Daddies' are examples of Role Play. Children may play at being a parent and punish a doll for not eating dinner or sleeping in their own bed as a way of better understanding why they have to do such things themselves.

There is a big difference between dress-up and Role Play. Dress-up may involve dressing up in a Disney costume and playing at being that character and re-enacting scenes in which that character features. Role Play is about taking a prop and using it to create a story and become a character around the prop. A large scarf might become a superhero's cape or a bandage, or a magical flying carpet that can transport a child and their teddy anywhere in the world. The play is designed around the prop. With dress-up, it's the other way around.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

1

Playing with sand, water, play dough, finger painting, or simple music games all help your toddler learn about their body and what it can do.

Research suggests that make-believe play is essential in developing the very important capacity for forms of self-regulation, including reduced aggression, delay of gratification, civility, and empathy. This shows benefits in later life, and is strongly associated with creative thinking ability and problem solving skills in adults.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

2

Early make-believe play helps to develop creative and reasoning skills.

Suitable articles for parents on this topic are available at www.toddlebox.ie/behaviour

References

1. Shmukler 1981; Singer & Singer 2005.