

Play a Little Everyday!

One of the most important aspects of emotional, social, and language development as children is play. The capacity to form and sustain relationships as adults actually links intricately to the ways in which play was learned and integrated as children. As adults we fail to see how important play is in our lives still. So today let's look at the stages of play development and see how in reparenting yourself, play is an important consideration.

Unoccupied play: Birth-3 months

This level of play refers to the initial awareness an infant shows to the surrounding world. Unoccupied play is technically, not "play" as there is no interaction, but instead refers to the first attempts baby makes to observe. Parents will often spend time moving shiny, colorful objects in the field of vision and are delighted when baby begins to move his/her head and eyes in order to follow along. This is a crucial development that leads to cognitive development and the desire to communicate. It is in these first attempts to observe, that a baby learns to focus on a parent's facial expression, and it is in this stage that parents are often rewarded with that first SMILE from baby.

RE-parenting exercises of unoccupied play:

- **observe, observe, observe:** Have you ever watched the wonder and fascination as a baby learns to observe the world? The fascination and earnestness of the observation is apparent on their little faces as they squint and breathe, and concentrate and see things for the first time. As adults we have lost that fascination with the world. In re-parenting we can rekindle that fascination. We can commit to "seeing" with fresh eyes.
- Look for the things in your environment that you that are so commonplace that you no longer see with wonder. Stay quiet and contemplate what you see, feel, intuit, without interaction. Just observe, with wonder.

Solitary Play: 0-3 years

This stage of play continues to encourage the child to make meaning of the surrounding world. Hopefully, this stage of play never ends! With this type of play, children learn how to entertain themselves at an appropriate physical and cognitive level, enabling children to improve their concentration, and to explore how things work. This type of play is the beginning of an internal relationship that builds on the child's capacity to be independent.

Solo play is often a monumental milestone in a child's development for parents or caregivers as well as for children. When children entertain themselves for a few minutes at a time, the child is learning so much about themselves....their particular interests, problem solving, reasoning, manipulation and control of objects. Parents love this! They can use the time to get a few moments to get something else done. Unfortunately, this level of play is often a stumbling block for many parents. Over indulgent parents will often think they need to interact non stop with the child, therefore robbing the child of the much needed internal relationship with independence. Dismissive and overwhelmed parents, can often find this stage to be such a relief, that they demand independence that robs the child of much needed interaction. The securely attached parent, will intuit the correct amount of solitary play that is helpful to the child.

RE-parenting exercises of solitary play:

In the age of devices, unfortunately, many of us have lost the art of independence. We have lost the desire and wonder of investigating the world around us. Rather, so many of us will take a few extra moments of quiet time and plop in front of the tv, or pick up a device. Wasting this precious time with disinterest and distraction. Curiosity and investigation have become lost aspects of self, which in actuality is a basic component of our humanity. Little babies and small children are not **made** to be curious and investigate. It is their nature and they are driven to be curious and investigate. Without the drive to investigate and play, there would be no development, and there would be a complete failure to thrive. How many of us as adults sadly live life as to say.....I have lost my drive and live in a state of failure to thrive? How many of us have lost the capacity to investigate, to be curious, to risk mistakes, to risk not knowing. So the number one commitment to reigniting your relationship with independent play is:

RISK—

- risk asking questions
- risk trying something new
- risk feeling the fear of not knowing,
- risk the shame of investigation that leads to a mistake.

Investigate how your parents encouraged or inhibited risk in your childhood play. How did this affect your relationship to risk as an adult. Too much risk? Not enough risk?

Parallel Play: begins at 2-3 years

Parallel play is the next critical development for a child. In this level of play a child will play alongside someone, but does not yet have the capacity to interact and relate with others. In this level of play, a toddler learns to use the skills of mimic and observation that were learned in solitary play in a new way. Now the child can use those skills to play near a child, often doing the same behaviors but without interaction. There are critical benefits to parallel play:

1. language development- interacting while observing exposes the toddler to new objects, and ways of playing. Vocabulary will often explode during this stage of play development.
2. Gross and fine motor development- as the play becomes more sophisticated, movement becomes more complex. Along with language, motor development will explode during this time period.
3. This early type of interaction expands the child's experience with frustration, joy, silliness, disappointment, etc. Feelings are experienced quite naturally as the child investigates and manipulates objects.
4. One of the most common words at this stage of development is ...mine! Kids at this stage of play have a hard time understanding the concept of sharing and mutual play.

RE-parenting exercises of parallel play:

Most of us have some ways in which we continue to “play/interact” in a parallel fashion into adulthood. That's fine, depending on the reason. We can interact in many parallel ways in quiet and connected silence. This is loving. But many relationships and marriages rely on parallel play in the ways they interact, out of dysfunction. And so, they have coffee “together” and but each read the paper in order to avoid talking. Or they watch tv, or a movie together, and don't interact. They do yard work “together” without a shared enjoyment. They go to a restaurant together and each look at their phones, to avoid the anxiety of the silence.

- Investigate the ways you spend time with your relationships. Look for ways that you spend time “together” without interaction. Is it loving? Is it avoidant?
- Investigate the feelings that are informing the way you spend time together with others. Are you keeping the interaction parallel to avoid conflict? Are you feeling fear and shame that you are less than the other?
- can you see ways your attachment style informs your ways of interacting?

Associative Play: begins at 3-4 years

Associative play is generally the first stage where social interaction is required in children's play as they engage in a mutual activity, though not working toward a common goal. It is at this stage that children will develop preferences in their play partners. And other children become more important in the child's life. Kids at this stage start to take an interest in the other children and what they're doing. That doesn't mean they all come together an agreed-upon activity, guidelines, or even a common goal — but hey, even us as adults may find such coordination difficult! This is the first age in which play will introduce more conflict. Each child will come to that struggle with a limited capacity to understand or share the experience of another. Instead, successful interaction is limited due to each child being stuck in their experience of their own feelings and needs. Playing dress-up, using the same playground equipment, or sharing a play kitchen are good examples of associative play **activities**; each child has their own focus but may be talking to each other and using the same toys to carry that out.

RE-parenting exercises of associative play:

Most of us have experienced the frustration and conflict of interacting with others and find that the struggle to achieve a common goal gets in the way of a successful experience. How often, do we get stuck on our own focus, even as we interact?

-Investigate ways in which you complete activities within your relationships. Do you get stuck on your focus, or investigate a shared focus? What feelings can you identify when asked to adapt an idea or interest of yours?
-Internally with just yourself, can you find the difficulty in listening to your own ideas, to investigate your feelings, and to come to a consensus of an internally focused goal?

Cooperative Play: begins at 4-5 years

Cooperative play involves children playing and working together towards a common goal or purpose. Being able to participate in cooperative play is extremely important. Cooperative play is especially important because it allows children to learn social rules such as sharing, turn taking, cooperation, dealing with disagreements, and coping with failure. This is the first stage of the development of meaningful friendships, and understanding the feelings of self and other. As children get better at this type of interaction, the **play** gets more complex. Can you hear from this definition how the skill of cooperative play is a critical development that will be used and expanded all through life? And can you also now see, that many adults do not yet have an evolved sense of cooperative play/interaction?

RE-parenting exercises of cooperative play:

Cooperation forms the basis for community in all of its forms, including in our own internal relationship. Most workplaces have some form of team building exercises in place as a way to continue to develop the adult skill of cooperative interaction.

-investigate your own capacity to cooperate. Do you have to be right? Are you uncomfortable risking telling your opinion? Can you work toward a common goal with flexibility in your relationships?
-do you make time for creative play? Is play silly and immature? Are you just too-too busy for play?

PLAY as an adult!

The importance of play as an adult is widely written about. But for many of us, somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we stopped playing. When we carve out some leisure time, we're more likely to zone out in front of the TV or computer than engage in fun, rejuvenating play like we did as children. But play is an important source of relaxation and stimulation for adults as well. Adding to the capacity to relieve stress, improve brain function, stimulate creativity, feel pleasure and joy, and improve relationships (both internal and others). So PLAY!

Those who play rarely become brittle in the face of stress or lose the healing capacity for humor." -Stuart Brown, MD

"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." -George Bernard Shaw

"The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct." -Carl Jung

If you want to be creative, stay in part a child, with the creativity and invention that characterizes children before they are deformed by adult society." -Jean Piaget