

Developmental Stages: Social & Object Play

Stages of Social Play *(Parten, 1932)*

Play Type	Description	Example
<i>Typically emerges in infants...</i>		
Unoccupied	Watching people and objects with brief interest, but not engaging with them	Yin is standing at the side of the playground fiddling with her shirt. She glances up when a bird flies by and turns her head when she hears another child squeal with delight.
Solitary	Playing alone and with different materials than nearby peers	Eliza is walking around the playground hitting a big stick against the metal poles. The other children are swinging on the swings or going down the slide.
<i>Typically emerges in toddlers...</i>		
Onlooker	Observing peers and talking about their play but not engaging directly in play	Santiago is standing next to the monkey bars watching other children try to hold on the longest. Santiago claps when a boy hangs for a long time and asks him if his hands hurt.
Parallel	Playing beside peers with similar materials but focused on their own play	A group of kids are playing outside. While Neveah scoops dirt with a shovel, the child next to her is moving dirt with a truck. Neveah doesn't seem to notice what the others are doing.
<i>Typically emerges in preschool...</i>		
Associative	Playing and engaging with peers with the same materials but without any shared purpose	Damien is in the sandbox. He comments on the child's bucket next to him and asks to borrow it. In exchange, he gives the child one of his cups. Damien notices another child building a sandcastle and builds one too. He invites a friend to the sandbox.
Collaborative	Playing and engaging with peers with the same materials and a shared purpose	Sula and other children on the playground are collecting pine cones. Sula suggests the pine cones are babies they must take care of. One boy tells her to go find leaves they can use as blankets. Sula tells another girl to watch the babies while she's gone.



Stages of Object Play *(Casby, 2003)*

Typical Age of Emergence		Description	Examples
Exploratory	2–4 months	Simple exploration of single objects, such as shaking, mouthing, and banging	Squeezing a ball, putting toy keys in their mouth, holding up a truck and peering at it
Relational	5–10 months	Exploring how two or more objects go together, e.g. stacking, building, and grouping	Bumping two pot lids together, putting blocks in a bucket, piling all the yellow foods together
Functional	10–12 months	Relating objects together in a conventional way, such as coloring with crayons, putting a puzzle together, and stirring with a spoon	Putting body parts into a Mr. Potato Head, putting animals into stalls in a toy barn, putting the lid on a teapot
Symbolic	12–18 months	Using objects in a nonliteral way including object substitution, imagining absent objects, giving agency or attributes to objects, and carrying out multi-step sequences	Feeding a baby bottle to their mother, pretending a teddy bear is brushing its own fur, acting out a sequence where figures wake up, eat imaginary food, and then get on a school bus to go to school



Exploratory



Relational



Functional



Symbolic

Play Assessment Data Sheet

This play assessment and data tracker are adapted from Casby, 2023.
You can find more details in our research review “Play through the ages.”



1. Gather toy sets:

- Constructive play set (Blocks, nesting cups, stacking rings)
- Eating set (Cups, plates, bowls, silverware, pitcher or tea pot)
- Sleeping set (Blanket, pillow, beds, bottle)
- Grooming set (Washcloth, soap, hairbrush, toothbrush, mirror)

With each set, include:

- Substitution items (block, sheet of paper)
- Agents (baby doll, toy animals)

You can also use what the family has in their home! If you do, try to gather a variety of toys that can be played with at a number of different levels and are interesting to the child.

2. Set up the environment:

- Explain what you'll be doing to the caregiver: *I'm going to show some toys to your child to see how they play with them. This will give us information about how we can meet them "where they're at" developmentally. First we'll see what they do on their own, so we won't show them what to do with the toys or ask questions/give directions. After that, we'll join in and see what they imitate and do with encouragement.*
- Decide if you or the caregiver will be the primary player. You can coach the child's caregiver to go through these steps with the child and take notes as they do so. That will also give you information about how the parent and child typically play with each other.

3. With each toy set do the following in this order:

- Observe what the child does on their own
- Model higher level play skills without giving instructions
- Encourage the child to play at higher levels with directions or prompts
- Bring out the next toy set, as time allows



Play Assessment Data Sheet

	Observed spontaneously	Imitated after a model	Successful after prompted
Exploratory Play (single objects) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shaking • squeezing • mouthing • banging 			
Relational Play (two or more objects together) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stacking • building • putting in 			
Functional Play (relating objects in a conventional way) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeding the doll • making an animal walk/jump • putting a puzzle together • stirring with a spoon 			
Symbolic Play (using objects in a nonliteral way) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • object substitution • making doll or animals "do" something • pretending attributes of objects • Multi-step sequences (stirring food, then feeding doll) 			

Primary type of spontaneous play observed: Exploratory / Relational / Functional / Symbolic

Types of play that are possible with models: Exploratory / Relational / Functional / Symbolic

