

What is Play?

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When it comes to babies and young children, the first things that we think of when hearing the word “play,” are toys that light up or make sounds and games with specific rules. However, you don't need expensive toys or lots of time to give your child great play experiences.

Play is how your child explores and learns about his world and includes many of the things the two of you already do together. The most important thing is that play should be fun for both your child and you!

What are the types of play?

When babies are just a couple months old they start to participate in simple “people play.” This type of play starts by watching other people and then smiling or laughing. After a while the baby learns to take a turn in the play and simple games like “peek-a-boo” or chase begin. This kind of play helps children develop social skills and learn to interact with other people.

Exploratory play is how babies and children learn about their world. Children become “little explorers” and seem to be asking, “What is this thing and what can I do with it?” They may try to discover the answer to this question by sucking, mouthing, looking at, or touching items around your house. This type of play helps build a child's understanding of the world and provides a foundation for earning new words.

Functional play is when babies and children learn to play with toys or objects in the “expected” way, such as pushing cars on the floor or stacking blocks to make a tower. This type of play helps children develop problem



solving and thinking skills as they imitate what they see others doing and figure out new ways to play with the same toy, such as kicking, throwing, and dropping a ball.

Pretend play happens when young children learn to recreate their day-to-day experiences. This starts simple with things like pretending to talk on the phone or make a toy airplane fly. As children get older they learn to combine pretend actions together, such as getting out a toy bowl, pretending to pour cereal and milk in, then giving it to a stuffed animal or another person.

Pretend play gives children practice using symbols. A symbol is something that stands for something else. In pretend play, children may use an object to stand for something else, such as using a banana as a phone. This kind of “symbolic thought” is also needed for children to learn to talk because words are symbols that stand for objects or ideas.

As children learn to use each of these different forms of play, we don't ever expect them to stop using that type of play completely. Instead, what we see is that children will find a way to use that same skill in a new and more complicated way.

Our Provo Early Intervention Program staff is skilled at assessing children's play skills as they relate to their development. If you live in the Provo, Utah school district and have concerns or questions about how your child plays, or how to help them move on to using a new play skill, feel free to email us at peip@esgw.org.