



# Understanding how children learn to play with other children

- As young children spend more time around their peers (i.e. other children), they gradually learn to interact and play socially with increasing skill and confidence.
- For most children, learning to interact with their peers seems to happen *without* much effort or direct teaching or guidance from adults.
- A closer look at *how* young children begin to play with their peers reveals that they learn social play in a gradual progression of “developmental steps” or stages.
- Many parents and professionals do not have access to this critical information and are therefore unaware of these key developmental steps.
- Outlining these steps or stages will help families and professionals better understand:
  - How children gradually progress from *playing alone* to *playing together with their peers*
  - Identify specific steps their child needs to *strengthen* to interact and play successfully with other children

## Typical Stages of Peer Play Development

- “Solo” play in similar area but away from peers
- Greater interest in and observation of peers
- “Parallel play” alongside peer(s) using similar toys and actions
- Shared, back-and-forth play with familiar peer(s)
- Shared, back-and-forth play with new or less familiar peer(s)
- Shared, cooperative play involving sustained communication, interaction and “negotiation”
- In general, children first demonstrate the ability to *spontaneously observe* and *play in parallel* with their peers *before* they interact or communicate **directly** with other children
  - “Spontaneously” = **without** prompting and directing from others
- Unlike typically developing children, children with ASD often remain in the *early stages* of peer play development (e.g. playing alone in the presence of other children, observing their peers).
- Research has found that:
  - A child’s ability to successfully communicate and interact with other children depends greatly on the quality of support provided by adults.

- Frequent adult prompting and directing can *interfere with* children's spontaneous initiation and self-directed social play with peers.
- Many well intentioned parents and professionals assume that *constant prompting and directing* will eventually help children interact and play ***spontaneously with other children***.
- To interact and play *spontaneously with their peers*, children with ASD must *voluntarily choose* to interact or play with other children because they **want to, not** because they are ***instructed or forced to***.
- Children with ASD can only achieve the goal of *spontaneous social interaction and play with peers* if they are helped to develop the following **basic, essential peer play skills**:
  - **Observing** other children in play
  - Allowing other children to play **close to them** without moving or turning away
  - **Persisting** or **staying** in social or play situations with peers
  - **Moving towards** & playing close to **peer(s)**
  - **Initiating** interaction with **peer(s)**
  - **Responding** to **peer(s)** in social or play situations
  - **Shifting their focus** back-and-forth between **peer(s) face(s)** and toys or objects of interest in play situations
  - Allowing **peer(s)** to **touch** and **use their toys** or objects in play
  - **Participating** in back-and-forth social **exchanges** with **peer(s)**
  - **Imitating peer(s)** actions, sounds, and play behaviors
- Which developmental steps or stages has your child *achieved*?
- Which developmental steps or stages has your child *not yet* achieved?
- Which specific skills does your child need to *strengthen* to interact and play more successfully with other children?
- \*\* To learn more about helping your child interact and play with other children, please see the following handout:
  - **How to Help Your Child Play with Other Children**

#### Additional Resources

- Koegel, Robert L., Koegel, Lynn K. (2006). Pivotal Response Treatments for Autism: Communication, Social & Academic Development. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing
- MacDonald, J., Stoika, P. (2007). Play to Talk: A Practical Guide to Help Your Late-Talking Child Join the Conversation. Madison, WI: Kiddo Publishing Co.
- Prizant, B. M., Wetherby, A. M., Rubin, E., Laurent, A. C., & Rydell, P. J. (2005). The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with autism spectrum disorders. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Quill, K. (2000) Do-Watch-Listen-Say: Social and Communication Intervention for Children with Autism. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Wolfberg, P.J. (2003) Peer play and the autism spectrum: The art of guiding children's socialization and imagination. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Co.

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