

# INFORMATION SHEET



## Just 4 Tots FDC

## STAGES OF SOCIAL PLAY DEVELOPMENT

### *What is it?*

Over the years as new children and families join the Just 4 Tots family, I am often asked questions about friendship. For example, “Has he made friends yet?” “Does she play with her friends?”

While we all want our children to create and maintain friendships it is important to remember that friendship and the behaviours that go with them (e.g., sharing, turn taking, negotiating, and cooperating) take a bit of time and practice to learn.

Just like many other important skills that children learn things usually happen in a particular order (we are all familiar with the “you need to walk before you run” analogy). Social play is the same – it happens in stages!

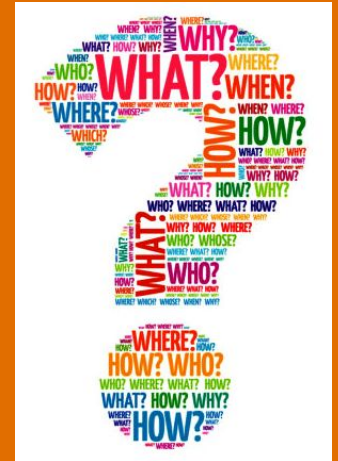
Mildred Parten researched social play by observing children between the ages of 2 and 5 years and developed the Stages of Play Theory.

Each stage helps children develop different skills that will be drawn upon and used to encourage further learning. When reading the stages of play, there are a couple of things to remember. Firstly, not all children learn at the same pace – each child will progress through each stage of development when they are ready. Secondly, once children have developed skills for the different stages, they may use variations and combinations of that stage and earlier stages as they continue to learn and develop.

The stages of play are: Unoccupied Play, Solitary Play, Onlooker Play, Parallel Play, Associative Play & Cooperative Play.



*An example of cooperative play*



## Do you have a question?

If you have a question or would like more information about child development or early childhood education, please feel free to drop us an email at [just4totsfdc@outlook.com](mailto:just4totsfdc@outlook.com) and we will do our best to provide you with answers!

### References

<https://www.paperpinecone.com/blog/understanding-mildred-partens-social-behavior-theory-play>

<https://ccy.jfcs.org/mine-mine-mine-7-ways-encourage-sharing/>

**“Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn.”**

**(O. Fred Donaldson)**

## Stages of Social Play Development

**Unoccupied Play:** lays the foundation for the remaining stages of play. Children are often exploring their environment without little involvement. Babies will be moving their arms and legs without a purpose – simply exploring that they can move. A child may stand still and observe the world around them. This stage encourages children to practice how to manipulate materials, how their world works and how to develop self-control.

**Solitary Play:** When a child begins to play on their own without being aware or interested in what everyone else is doing. Children entertain themselves without any other social engagement. While this may be worrying for adults, it is normal and should be encouraged without interruption. Solitary play encourages children to build skills for working independently.

**Onlooker Play** is when children sit back and watch their friends play without engaging with them. Sometimes they may talk to the children, but they don't join in the activity. This may come across as the child may be scared to join in. However, this is a normal stage of development. Children who engage with onlooker play learn to observe how play works and social rules of relationships. They watch and learn how different toys can be used.

**Parallel Play** In this stage, while children are still playing on their own, they are playing near the other children. They don't really engage in any social exchanges. For example, 2 children may both be driving cars on the mat, however their play doesn't overlap.

**Associative Play** highlights a change in the type of play children engage in. The child's play will still be independent, but it also involves group activity. They become more focused on the other children in the group rather than the activity. This stage of play encourages the child to use the skills they observed and learnt in onlooker and parallel play. An example of this type of play is when children put on capes and be superheroes together but not developing a storyline to their play (e.g., not saving anyone). This stage of play encourages children to develop problem solving and cooperation skills.

**Cooperative Play** is when children put all the skills from the previous stages together and play as a group with a common goal. This could be assigning roles in dramatic play – “you be the cooker”, “you take the order” when playing restaurants. Of course, while this stage is called cooperative play, it can lead to many conflicts as sharing, turn taking, and negotiating control are tricky skills to learn.

## Sharing

Young children are inherently egocentric. It takes time for them to develop skills such as empathy and sharing. Some ideas to help with this include:

**Don't force sharing** instead encourage children to wait until the other person is finished. Remind the child with the toy that the other child would like a turn after they are finished.

**Help develop a sense of empathy** If conflict around sharing arises, ask the children how they think their friend is feeling, how do you feel when this happens.

**Encourage cooperation** games like rolling a ball or pushing a car to and from helps children recognize that the toy they share will come back. Peek a boo encourages turn taking.

**Praise positive behaviour** using descriptive praise when your child does share “that was great sharing” – the more focus you place on the positive behaviour, the more response you get from your child.

**Each child develops at their own pace:** social skills like sharing takes time for children to learn and understand. As your child's social, emotional, and cognitive development increases, other skills like social play skills will also develop.