



S: Social play and its importance: It takes two!

'Z-A of Play: S' by Lenka Janik Blaskova

PhD Student

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

Isn't it amazing how many different ways children find to play together? From physical, rough-and-tumble play, to pretend play with lots of different toys, to games with shared goals and rules (rules that can change quickly when things don't quite go as little ones might have wished!). There are many forms of social play, but they all involve interaction with adults or other children. In a way, the different types of social play could be seen as mirroring the development of children's abilities to engage with others.

When we watch children play together, their interactions can seem entirely fun-filled and almost effortless, but joining in with others for play activities is not as simple as it may seem from the outside. It requires some remarkable skills on the part of the players. Social play offers a relatively safe context for children to develop their social and emotional skills, including the development of:

- **Turn-taking and sharing skills** (social behaviour): This can be as simple as a child raising their hand with a toy to show it to their playmate, who looks up in response. These behaviours can become more sophisticated through more joined interactions though. For example, when children are building a LEGO model, they not only have to share and take turns, but also work together and problem-solve.
- **Understanding emotions and building empathy** (social cognition) develops as we become aware of our own emotions and thoughts, as well as those of others. These mental processes help children realise how others may feel, think, or behave so that they can adjust their own behaviours accordingly. Although this may sound rather complicated, children's minds can even become quite active during a simple game of Peekaboo as they observe, react to, or even anticipate the next moves of their playmate and start connecting emotionally.
- **Managing disappointment and conflict** is part of what we call 'self-regulation' and is described in more detail in other PEDAL Hub play pieces [here](#) and [here](#). In social play, these skills can be observed when children's play is not quite going the way they want it to. They may propose a new game or introduce a new rule, which their playmate does not agree with. Dealing with a play partner who disagrees with their ideas can give children good practice in managing conflict. This might help them to respond appropriately in other situations that are not related to play.



- **Language and communicating with others** are essential for expressing our own ideas and understanding the meaning of what others say. Language and communication not only facilitate social interaction but they can often be the objective of social play. Nursery rhymes, word games, or even singing and dancing together can turn language development into real fun.

The tricky part about researching social play and children's development is that they often complement each other. So, the more children play together, the more opportunities they have to progress with their social development. At the same time, they need to have developed some level of social skills before they can actively interact with their friends. Because of this it can be difficult for us as researchers to understand the extent to which social play develops social skills. However, while we may not have resolved this chicken or the egg dilemma, we know ways to promote social development and social play.

Read more

- The development of play – [Lillard \(2015\)](#)
- Developmental psychology and early education – [Whitebread \(2012\)](#)

What can parents or teachers do to encourage social play?

- Join your child's play activities from an early age.
- Find chances for your child to meet and play with other children of different ages, this might be with siblings or cousins, or at a local playgroup or toddler group.
- Find out what is happening in your community and join in! Local councils and schools often organise events and the local playground can be a great place for your child to meet other children and make friends.
- Help older children to play more interactively with each other by asking them to create a themed poster together, build a puzzle, or re-enact a scene from a story.

To some parents and educators with busy schedules or curriculums to cover, the above tips may sound like a bit of a challenge. Even brief interactions with your child in social play will give you amazing opportunities to see their responses, learn about them as a person and create memories together. With a bit of practice, you may get to witness how your child's social play develops with their social skills. Or is it the other way around...?



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