



Occupational Therapy – Play

Play is an essential part of every child’s life. It is important for the enjoyment of childhood as well as helping to develop social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. Having time and space to play gives children the opportunity to meet and socialise with friends.



Allowing children freedom to choose what they want to do through play, increase their self-awareness, self-esteem and self-respect. Play provides children with the opportunities to practise and develop physical and motor development, cognitive thinking and the planning skills required for developing the functional tasks of day to day living: including dressing, school work, feeding and self-care.

Children will typically develop their own games and play, though adults can help by facilitating the environment and encouraging playful and creative experiences.

How play activities can develop functional skills

Type of play	Functional skills
Fine motor	Games such as threading, buttoning, craft and building blocks can help develop fine motor and dexterity skills required for activities such as dressing and clothes fastening. Fine motor skills are also important for the development of handwriting, and using tools such as cutlery and scissors.
Gross motor	Games and activities which involve climbing, swinging, running, pushing and pulling can help to develop the strength and coordination needed for dressing, riding a bike, drying after a shower or bath.
Planning	Playing puzzles, computer games, following treasure map or writing lists can help develop the skills needed when following a timetable in school, packing a school bag or writing shopping lists and planning a bus route.
Imagination and creative	Playing imaginative games which involve shop or home corner can help develop imagination.
Social	Playing and socialising with others, role play, sports, construction games and outdoor “forest schools”.

The importance of play

- Improves and maintains children’s physical and mental health
- Allows children the opportunity to mix with other children and develops their confidence through developing new skills
- Promotes their imagination, creativity and independence
- Encourages children of all abilities and backgrounds to play together.
- Provides opportunities to develop social skills learning.
- Helps to encourage resilience through risk taking, and problems solving, and dealing with new situations
- Provides opportunities to learn about their environment and the wider community.

Stages of play

Type	Age	Explanation
Solitary	0-2 years	Plays alone, little interaction
Spectator	2-2 ½ years	Watch others children but does not join in
Parallel	2 ½ - 3 years	Play alongside others but not together
Associative	3-4 years	Interacts with others. Has a preference of people.
Cooperative	4 +	Play together and share goals.

Opportunities for play

- Accessible spaces for indoor and outdoor play.
- Allow and develop interests with adult guidance and encouragement.
- Variety of toys, games and activities to choose from.
- Joining groups and clubs.